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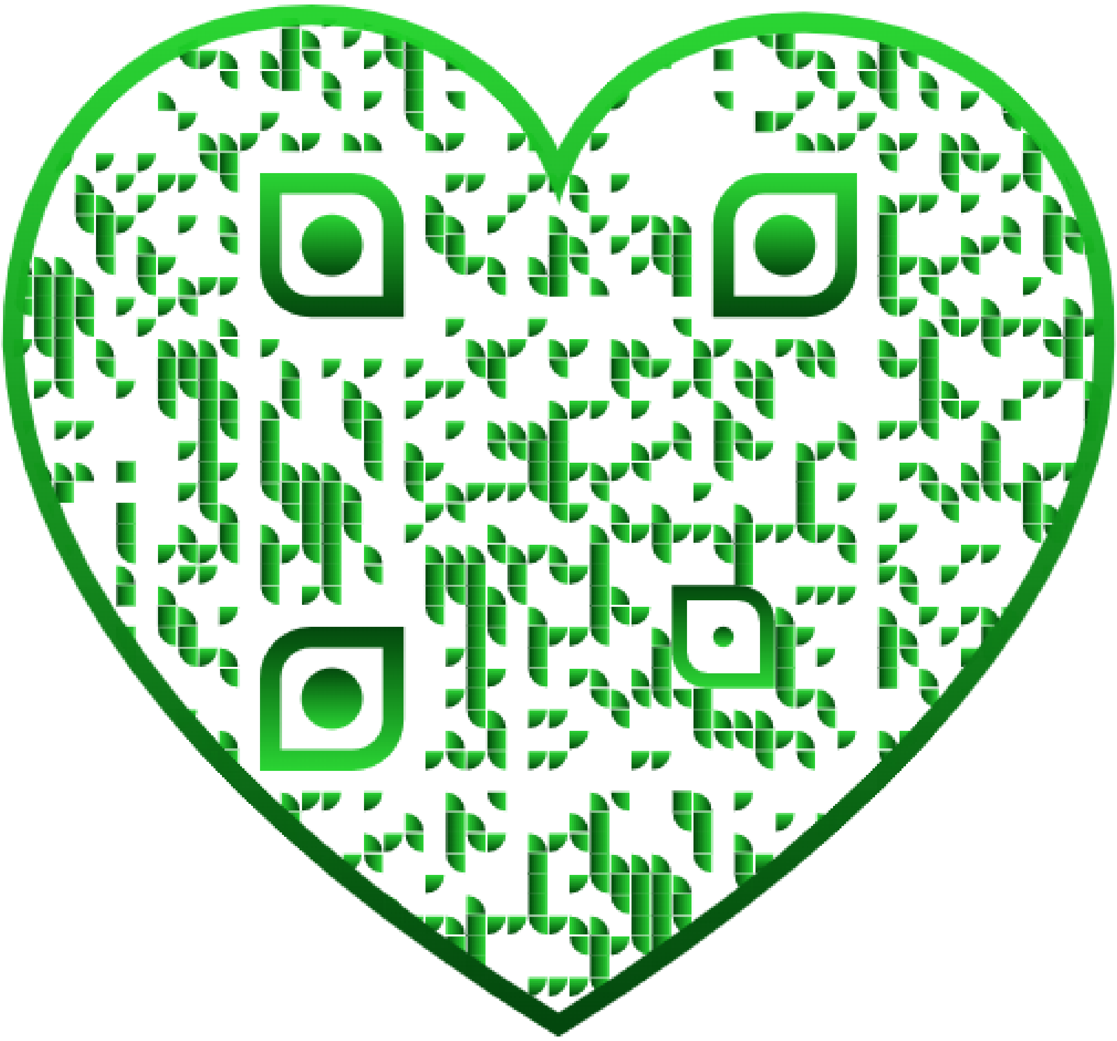
THE PRICE OF PURPOSE

RICHELIEU DENNIS BUILT AN EMPIRE ON EQUITY—BUT THE FIGHT CONTINUES.



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EXPLORE THIS ISSUE

Cover by
DREW GURIAN

MAN ON A MISSION

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After selling Sundial Brands to Unilever in the largest acquisition of a majority Black-owned CPG company, Richelieu Dennis knew his next move would be much like his first: expanding access and promoting equity. He's doing just that with Sundial Media & Technology Group and the New Voices Fund, earning him Adcolor's 2025 Beacon Award.

BY MARK STENBERG

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TV

ON BRAND CROWNS A WINNER

Meet the Gen Z marketer who won Jimmy Fallon's ad competition. **P.10**

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The Get Sh*t Done Officers Sound Off

Chief marketing officers gathered at ADWEEK House to tell it like it is. **P.6**

OFF THE CLOCK

GONE DEEP SEA FISHING

Mādin Agency's Jamieson Maunder lives for weekends on the water. **P.70**

INNOVATOR 50

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In 2025, there's no such thing as business as usual. Our first ever Innovator 50 list recognizes the power players across adtech, streaming, marketing, and retail who are changing their industries by dreaming bigger.

BY BRANDON HARDIN

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INSIGHT

Dear Robot Santa Claus

'Tis the season for developing an agentic AI marketing plan. **P.8**

VOICE

WHERE AI FALLS SHORT

All the data in the world means nothing without strategy. **P.12**

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Inside the Dream Factory

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REWRITING THE RULES

Each year, She Runs It honors women in marketing, media, and tech who are transforming their brands, companies, organizations, teams, and the industry overall. These game changers are catalysts of innovation who are reinventing the marketing playbook to meet new challenges.

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CHANGING
the GAME
2025

CALL FOR ENTRIES: MOST POWERFUL WOMEN IN SPORTS

It's time to celebrate the women and non-binary people pushing sports and sports marketing forward. ADWEEK's Most Powerful Women in Sports 2026 list is seeking star players, from athletes with an entrepreneurial spirit to pioneering executives and charismatic creators. This list honors individuals who have made a significant impact on sports marketing in the past 12 months. There is no entry fee. Nominations are due by Nov. 25.

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Nielsen IQ On Premise Total US Volume w.e 7/12/25

WHY CMOS STILL MATTER

A day in the life of the Get Sh*t Done Officer, live from ADWEEK House. *By Robert Klara*

WHILE THE CHIEF marketing officer role isn't about to disappear, it's impossible to ignore the mounting evidence of its steady erosion.

The average CMO tenure slipped from 4.1 years in 2024 to 3.9 years in 2025. Last year, 63% of Fortune 500 companies had CMOs; that figure has since dropped by 5%.

It gets worse. According to a recent McKinsey report, "CFOs often view marketing as a cost center rather than an investment." And 2025 data gathered by marketing firm Boathouse reveals that 14% of CEOs admit to having thought about eliminating the CMO position.

Scary? Very much so. But despite the numbers, CMOs themselves are not as fatalistic about their futures.

At ADWEEK House during Advertising Week, our chief brand and community officer Jenny Rooney sat down with three leading CMOs to challenge the notion that marketers are an endangered species in the C-suite with reasons why having a marketing leader still matters.

Uzma Rawn Dowler of Major League Baseball, Christie Sclater of Clinique, and former Vera Bradley CMO Alison Hiatt suggested ways CMOs can convey their relevance to CEOs amid pressure to cut costs and the rise of generative AI tools.

Alison Hiatt (formerly of Vera Bradley), Uzma Rawn Dowler of MLB, Jenny Rooney of ADWEEK, and Christie Sclater of Clinique at ADWEEK House during Advertising Week.

IVAN PIEDRA PHOTOGRAPHY

BE MORE THAN A MARKETER

Today, a CMO's responsibilities stretch far beyond the traditional boundaries of advertising and promotion, but CFOs and CEOs often do not fully appreciate that. So it falls to the chief marketer not just to advocate for what they do, but also to translate it.

"The CMO role, in my mind, is like a Get Sh*t Done Officer," Dowler said. "The 'C' and the 'O' are there, and then in the middle you should just put whatever you need to put in there, because our roles are not just marketing."

MARKET TO ACTUAL CUSTOMERS

Results-obsessed and increasingly skeptical chief executives may be more likely to question the thinking behind, or validity of, an advertising campaign or marketing strategy. It's probably a good idea to remind other corporate chiefs that they don't need to get the idea.

"If they have opinions about certain things, it's OK—you have to remind them, 'Hey, this actually isn't meant for you,'" Dowler said.

COMING UP

Want to be in the room where industry leaders tell it like it is? Find out where we'll be popping up next at ***adweek.com/events***

"But we have all this data and research to show that it will resonate for the people that it is meant for."

GET AHEAD OF AI

As genAI gets more advanced, the C-suite will be even more likely to question creative roles, or even the marketing department overall. Rightly or not, it will fall to the CMO to explain AI's place, and marketing's place above it.

"AI is a tool, not a strategy," said Hiatt, who added that CEOs should remember that CMOs aren't selling a clever idea but rather delivering what a brand needs most—consumers. "At the end of the day, with marketing, you're buying a customer. We're not talking about that enough."

EXPLAIN WHY LEADERSHIP IS CRITICAL

Sclater pointed out that while AI may be able to generate content, that's no replacement for a marketing leader who can serve as coach, interlocutor, decision maker, and innovator.

"In the absence of a CMO, we're just running a relay race, and business becomes the handoff to another handoff. By the time you get to the end, where is the customer?" Sclater said. "There will always be a need to bring ideas together around a central mission of serving a customer."

MAINTAIN CONSISTENCY WHERE ALGORITHMS CAN'T

As AI is able to generate endless permutations of a brand, the CMO ultimately becomes the last guarantor of tradition, recognizability, and solidity.

"The CMO holds tight to the brand," Sclater said. "If there isn't a place where the purity or the essence is distilled and strong, inherently the algorithm will move to create different versions of it.

"The CMO at its best is also keeping that purity, keeping that consistency." AW

ROBERT KLARA *is the senior editor of brands at* **ADWEEK.**

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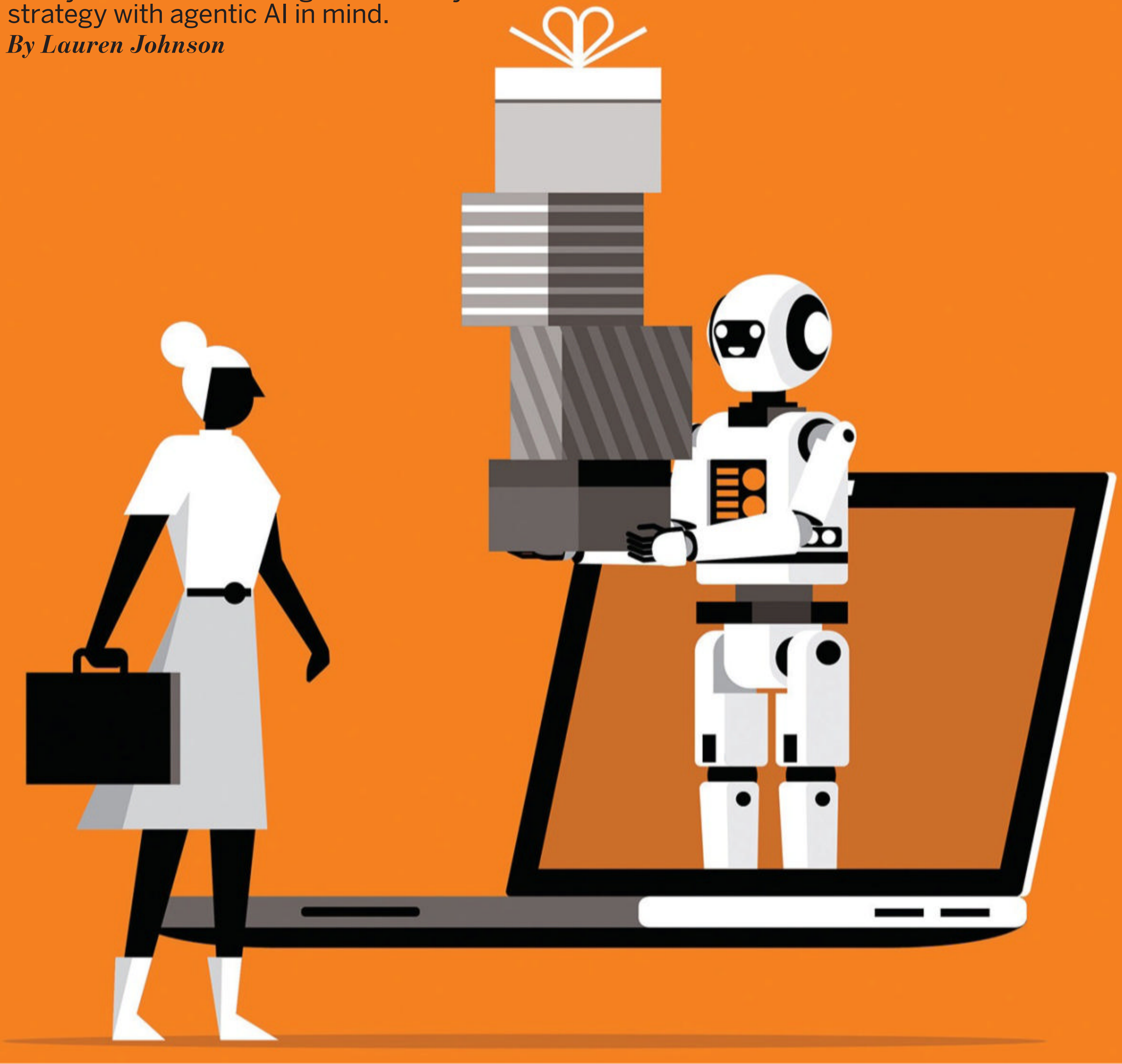
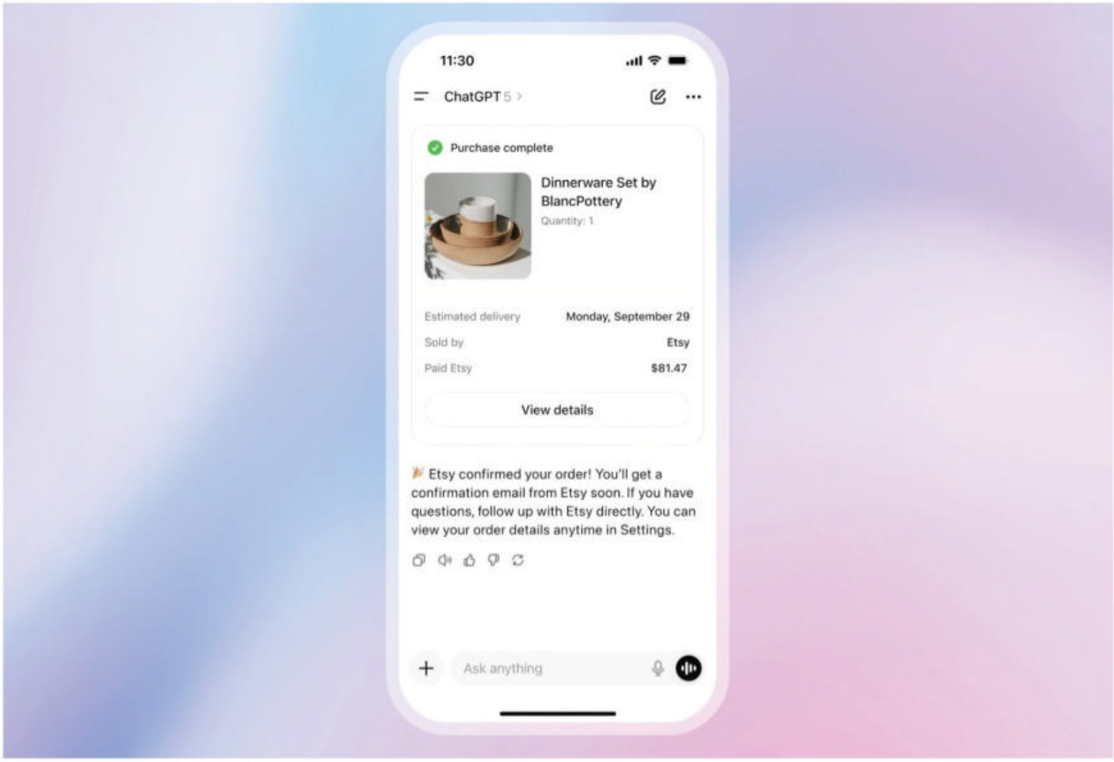
Attention, AI Shoppers

Savvy brands are crafting their holiday strategy with agentic AI in mind.

By Lauren Johnson





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▲ As AI chatbots and tools recommend products, brands need to figure out how to get to the top of their lists.

SORBETTO/GETTY IMAGES; OPENAI/CHATGPT

AS MORE PEOPLE use AI search engines like OpenAI and Perplexity, marketers are developing holiday strategies to ensure their brands appear prominently in their results.

Big AI players are trying to cash in on commerce. OpenAI is working with Walmart, Etsy, and Shopify to power a feature that allows people to make purchases directly from ChatGPT. Walmart's integration will include a Buy button and is linked to a shopper's Walmart or Sam's Club account when it goes live this fall.

Perplexity has AI agents that help consumers research and buy products from ecommerce websites. Google is experimenting with shopping tools within AI Mode, its AI-backed Google Search feature. Walmart and Amazon also have their own AI agents that help customers find products on their websites.

While retailers don't receive the bulk of ecommerce traffic from AI chatbots and tools, it's a growing source of referral traffic. Roughly 27% of Etsy's referral traffic comes from AI chatbots and tools, with 23% of that traffic coming from ChatGPT specifically, according to data from Similarweb. About 16% of Walmart's referral traffic comes from AI, and ChatGPT alone contributes 14% of referral traffic; for Target, it's 15% and 13% respectively.

Experts agree that commerce integrations between AI tools and retailers are not likely to drive significant holiday sales this year given that more than 80% of sales still happen in stores, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Separate data from Adobe expects AI traffic to increase 520% year-over-year during the 2025 holiday season, with the bulk of consumers using the technology to research products.

> “
> *Agentic AI is a growing source of referral traffic*

Still, marketers are plotting ways to ensure their products show up in the condensed results that AI spits out. Unlike traditional search engines like Google, people use AI engines to search for products using more specific, conversational queries.

For example, instead of searching for a “red dress,” people may ask an AI search engine for a list of red dresses that match a pair of black shoes with high-star reviews. The average SEO search query is two or three words while the average AI search query is 12 to 20 words long, according Imri Marcus, CEO of Brandlight, a startup that helps brands appear in AI platforms.

That specificity means brands are tweaking their holiday advertising to account for AI. “For the brands we work with, we have strategies for them that are specific to the holiday season—that didn't happen last year,” he said.

HOLIDAY SHOPPING GETS OUTSOURCED

To prominently appear in AI search results, brands are tweaking web content like landing pages and reviews, and cranking out social media content with information about discounts and promotions.

Zeroing in on users who are searching for the best price for gifts is one way for brands to stand out in AI engines during holiday shopping, said Marcus.

That also opens up a big challenge for retailers to optimize their websites for AI engines with current inventory, prices, and stock availability.

David MacDonald, head of retail and commerce experience practice at Publicis-owned Razorfish, pointed to Reddit becoming a bigger focus for marketers because AI models readily pull information from its forums. Reddit posts tend to focus more on customer sentiment rather than information about products. Instead of matching content to specific queries, marketers should focus on matching context, he said.

“You start thinking about the ways that consumers think about your product and how they work together, and those are going to be the nuances that change,” he said.

Brands and retailers are also testing on-site shopping agents that find and recommend products. Agentic AI that helps shoppers find products on retailers' websites can increase conversions up to 25% compared to shoppers that use traditional search to find products on an ecommerce website, according to Morgan Seybert, chief business officer and head of retail at data and AI consulting firm Tredence.

CRANKING OUT SOCIAL CONTENT

VaynerX predicts that brands with a content strategy optimized for AI tools will outperform brands without one by 20% to 40% this holiday season, said Zubin Mowlavi, EVP of commerce at VaynerX.

One way brands can stand out in agentic commerce is by creating video content that is being increasingly picked up by AI models, specifically YouTube Shorts and live videos, Mowlavi suggested. These videos should answer the top 10 questions that consumers have about a brand.

Companies should also rethink gift guides this holiday season. Instead of guides that include broad categories like “gifts for dads that cost $50-$100,” brands should create more specialized topics such as “gifts that have sold well on TikTok Shop for the past 60 days.” These more specialized topics are likely to be picked up by AI models.

“Make sure you have the right content, [and] a significant frequency of content,” he added.

LAUREN JOHNSON *is the deputy editor of commerce at* **ADWEEK.**

‘It’s Pretty Surreal’

Meet the Gen Z marketer who won it all on Jimmy Fallon’s On Brand. *By Bill Bradley*

BIANCA FERNANDEZ NEVER thought she'd be on reality TV—then came an Instagram DM from someone working on a new advertising competition show, NBC's On Brand with Jimmy Fallon.

"I remember calling my mom and being like, 'Do you think this is legit?'" Fernandez told ADWEEK. "'But also, if this is legit, how perfect is this for me?'"

It was so perfect, in fact, that she won it all. On the show's Season 1 finale that aired Oct. 31, Fallon and his co-host, Bozoma Saint John, announced Fernandez as the show's first Innovator of the Year. Along with a cash prize of $100,000, her concept for the final client, Therabody, will be produced as a commercial.

"It's pretty surreal," said Fernandez, a Gen Z marketer based in New York. "Going into the experience, I had truly no idea what to expect, but I did know I really wanted to win, and I knew based off of what was described to me that I'd have a shot if I gave it my all and didn't hold myself back."

She embraced that ethos throughout the season, often becoming the project lead on campaigns such as creating a viral drink for drive-in QSR chain Sonic and adding a "spicy take" idea to Captain Morgan's Super Bowl campaign. While on the show, she even proclaimed her intentions to make the Forbes' 30 Under 30 List.

But success wasn't easy. Fernandez noted there were "a lot of pressure cooker moments" throughout the season, with some of the most stressful times not even making the final cut. For instance, when meeting with graphic designers, contestants had equal but limited time—what Fernandez described as just "minutes"—to turn their ideas into campaigns, sometimes overnight.

As if that weren't enough pressure, everything was on the contestants, with Fernandez saying NBC made sure to promote fairness so the behind-the-scenes creatives didn't impose their own strategy while translating contestant ideas into pitch presentations, even if those ideas went awry.

The finale brought on added challenges as Fernandez and fellow finalist Ryan Winn had to create and shoot an entire commercial for Therabody, essentially by themselves and in an equal but "insanely short amount of time," according to Fernandez.

"It was wild," she said. "I remember in the bus on the way shot-listing [the ad] out on a piece of paper and a notepad, sketching out frame by frame each of the shots that I needed."

Stress will find a way out,
one way or another.
Let it go.
Therabody

▲

While her day job runs on insights, Bianca Fernandez had to hone different marketing skills for the show.

DAVID HOLLOWAY/NBC

But, in many ways, Fernandez had been training for that pressure for years.

YOU CAN'T JUST TUMBL INTO A WIN

The marketer's journey to On Brand began in the early 2010s in high school, when she created a Tumblr all about preppy fashion. Fernandez built a following, met like-minded friends on the pre-influencer internet, and even scored a brand deal with Vineyard Vines. "It was my first taste of what would eventually become my career," she said.

Though Fernandez had gone pre-law in college and even interned in politics in D.C., she eventually pivoted back to marketing, landing at TikTok in its early days to convince brands of the platform's merits before running social at Tarte Cosmetics. Today, she serves as the head of brand engagement at actor Lili Reinhart's beauty brand, Personal Day.

Besides her family group chat coming to life since the show's release, Fernandez said there have been "a lot more" inbound requests for work collaborations. But she still has her day job, which requires interacting with marketers in the industry—and they have questions.

HOW TO KEEP PITCHES ON BRAND

Firstly, yes, there is a ton of material that understandably didn't make it to the screen, as pitches that could be around 5 minutes or more were cut down to seconds. Because of that, not everything translated, with Fernandez even speaking up for fellow contestant BT Hale's out of this world, alien-infused "Take Me to Your Dunkin'" pitch.

"I thought that's genius," she said. "That would take a lot more world-building, but I still think that's one of my favorite ideas from the show."

Fernandez also noted that since her day job focuses on strategy and facts, she tried to ground her campaign ideas in insights. But success on the show also required contestants to pitch more of their personal stories, as well as what they thought would play well for broad audiences and look good on television.

Actually executing their ideas also brought certain challenges. For instance, Fernandez pitched an ASMR activation for Pillsbury, complete with sensory deprivation domes, but those had to be replaced with clear structures for filming purposes, she said. That also created an emergency air conditioning situation after the clear domes and all the electronics inside overheated in the sun. "It was all hands on deck," Fernandez said.

But Fernandez was down to roll with it all: In an episode where everyone had to act excited as a CGI Pillsbury Doughboy made its way into the show, Fernandez hammed it up with the other contestants, who she said were thrilled to bring "movie magic" to life. And though she wishes some of her facial expressions hadn't made the final cut, she said it all "made for good TV."

"You really wear what you think on your face, don't you?" Fernandez said, also noting that she was proud of herself for leaning in and "wasn't afraid to take big swings and show up every day."

Though Fernandez hasn't made the Forbes 30 Under 30 List "yet," she noted she recently had an interview with the outlet. Meanwhile, she's focused on growing as a marketer, taking on more commercial and branded production work, and enjoying the reactions now that she can share her news with the world.

"I'm lucky I have the opportunity to be head of brand at a consumer brand right now, run marketing campaigns, and do that kind of work," Fernandez said.

"I'm excited to keep doing that work, keep getting better, and—yeah—ride the wave."

BILL BRADLEY *is the deputy TV, media and sports editor at* **ADWEEK.**

ANDRIY ONUFRIYENKO/GETTY IMAGES

AI Marketing's Real Edge

Strategy remains essential—and essentially human.

AI IS EVERYWHERE. Boards are asking for technology roadmaps. Marketers are testing prompts, automating campaigns, and generating content at scale. The tools are dazzling. The promises are intoxicating. But amid all the excitement, one thing is becoming painfully clear: Tools alone do not create strategy.

We have entered the AI plateau. After the initial hype, companies are realizing that access to technology doesn't automatically translate into differentiation. An AI-generated ad or automated audience segment can be impressive, but if it is not grounded in a clear strategic decision, it is noise. It may look sophisticated, but it is hollow. The market doesn't respond to speed or novelty alone. It responds to clarity, insight, and relevance.

The real competitive edge in the age of AI is not the tool, but the thinking behind it. Strategy is not a prompt. A prompt can produce content, suggest targeting, or even identify trends. But it cannot decide what problem your brand is solving, who your audience truly is, or why your message should matter. Those are human questions, and they are the questions that strategy answers.

OUTPUTS =/= IMPACT

Many companies have fallen into the trap of believing that the faster they generate outputs, the closer they are to impact. The opposite is true. Without a guiding framework, AI can amplify misalignment, accelerate errors, and make noise louder, not clearer. A campaign designed without purpose can now scale instantly, creating an illusion of execution while failing to move the needle.

Consider audience segmentation. AI can analyze billions of data points and identify patterns that humans would struggle to see. But without strategic intent, those patterns may be irrelevant. A brand might discover a niche audience with high engagement potential. But if that audience doesn't align with the brand's core value proposition, the campaign risks wasting budget, confusing the market, or diluting messaging. The tool sees correlation. Strategy sees meaning.

Similarly, AI can generate creative in seconds, but the quality of output doesn't equal strategic impact. A beautiful ad can be irrelevant if it doesn't solve a business problem or connect with a consumer need.

Strategy also guides tradeoffs. AI can recommend thousands of options, but it cannot decide what to prioritize. It cannot weigh brand equity against short-term revenue. It cannot balance risk against potential reward. Humans make these choices. Humans define the criteria that AI then applies. Without that framework, the tool becomes a factory of possibilities with no compass.

The most successful teams use AI to accelerate insight, surface efficiency, and explore creative possibilities, all within a framework of clear decisions.

PRIORITIZE THINKING

The AI plateau is also cultural. Many organizations are rushing to adopt technology to keep up or look innovative, which can sideline strategic thinking. The loudest outputs can seem impressive. But they do not guarantee impact or differentiation.

For marketers, the challenge is to resist the seduction of output for output's sake. It is to prioritize thinking over speed, clarity over quantity, and relevance over novelty. AI can help us execute faster, but it can't decide the meaning of the execution.

We are in a period of unprecedented capability, but capability without purpose is wasted effort. The organizations that succeed will be the ones that remember that tools are extensions of strategy, not replacements. They will be the ones who approach AI with discernment, who invest in defining the "why" before the "how," and who treat strategy as the ultimate differentiator in a tool-obsessed world.

The consequences of ignoring this are already visible. Campaigns optimized by AI without a guiding framework may achieve clicks or impressions but fail to build brand equity. Data-driven targeting can isolate audiences with precision, yet the wrong audience misses the point entirely. Tools without strategy can deliver more work in less time, but that work may be irrelevant or even damaging.

Strategy is the filter. It ensures that AI-driven initiatives are purposeful, aligned, and relevant. It ensures that speed is paired with clarity, output with intent, and insight with judgment. AI can accelerate execution, but only strategy provides direction.

In the age of AI, the loudest voices will not win. The clearest thinking will. Organizations that embrace AI without sacrificing strategy will move faster, smarter, and with more precision.

Strategy remains essential, and essentially human. And in the age of AI, strategy is what will determine who thrives.

**JAVIER E.
RODRIGUEZ HORTA**

Senior consultant at CvE, the strategic advisory arm of Goodway Group

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WITH MARK STENBERG

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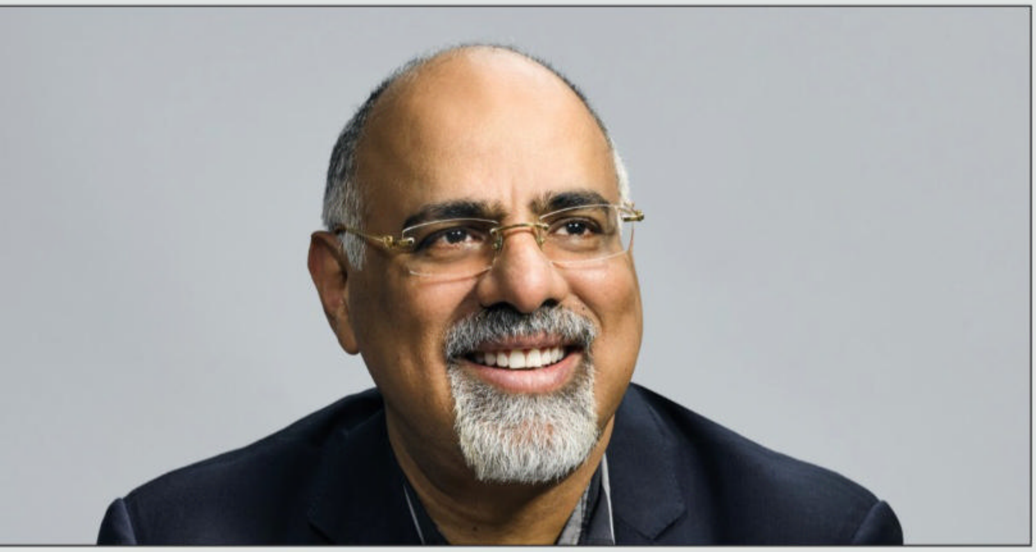
A Master-class in Marketing

Three 'priceless' moments from Raja Rajamannar's Mastercard tenure. ***By Rebecca Stewart***



AFTER 12 YEARS as Mastercard's chief marketing and communications officer, Raja Rajamannar is leaving his post and moving into the role of senior fellow. Accenture marketing boss Jill Kramer will succeed him beginning Dec. 1.

Under Rajamannar's leadership, Mastercard transformed into a marketing-led, data-driven organization. A former chair of the ANA's Global CMO Growth Council, he also founded Mastercard's healthcare business and authored Quantum Marketing, now taught at more than 300 universities.

At the financial firm, Rajamannar's legacy is rooted in evolving Mastercard's "Priceless" platform.

Debuted in 1997, long before Rajamannar joined, the original TV commercial from McCann showcased precious moments in life, ending on the tagline: "There are some things money can't buy; for everything else, there's Mastercard."

Since taking on Mastercard's top marketing role in 2012, Rajamannar has turned the "Priceless" promise into a multidimensional brand platform, spanning experiences, innovations—and even interpreted it to expand inclusion.

To commemorate his tenure, we're looking back on three standout marketing moments from Rajamannar.

Start
Something
Priceless
mastercard

1. Evolving a 'Priceless' proposition

To evolve "Priceless," Rajamannar shifted its focus from simply delivering memorable moments to curating extraordinary experiences for customers. These have ranged from an exclusive dinner atop a Times Square billboard in New York City to unique restaurant partnerships across the U.S., Brazil, the U.K., Hong Kong, and beyond.

And then there were the bespoke macaron flavors in partnership with luxury patisserie Ladurée to let people "taste" the brand.

"Priceless" has also been central to Mastercard's longtime Grammys sponsorship, including a recent partnership with Lady Gaga that gave fans the chance to be part of a fan version of the video for her 2025 single "Abracadabra."

Speaking to ADWEEK five years into his role, Rajamannar said "Priceless" had endured "tectonic changes in the consumer landscape" because it tapped into a universal human truth: experiences matter more than things.

"Once you find your truth, the key is to adapt the manifestation appropriately to the current environment," he said.

2. Multisensory Marketing

One of Rajamannar's boldest moves came in 2019, when he removed Mastercard's name from its logo, leaving only two interlocking circles.

"Reinvention in the digital age calls for modern simplicity," he said at the time, adding the company "felt ready to take this next step" in its brand evolution.

In the same year, Mastercard debuted a sonic logo, a unique 1.3-second sequence of notes presented at checkout. Mastercard said the chime had boosted trust and made customers 80% more likely to return to a merchant utilizing the sound.

A Mastercard album followed in 2022; then in 2024, Mastercard announced during Brandweek that it was launching a haptic logo, a distinctive series of vibrations that customers can feel via their phone when shopping online or using a payment terminal.

Rajamannar said the innovation represented a "new frontier" for marketing. "We're literally defining a new boundary and field altogether," he said, adding that the tactile branding has driven a points increase in customer satisfaction within the tune of the "high teens to low 20s."

5412 5555 5555 5555
True Name

3. Bringing Purpose to 'Priceless'

Rajamannar has extended the "Priceless" brand promise to one that champions accessibility, inclusion, and diversity through marketing and design.

Innovations have included the True Name initiative, developed in 2020 to support non-binary and transgender people. The feature lets cardholders use their preferred name on their card instead of their legal name.

In 2023, the financial services giant launched the Touch Card, which features simple yet distinct notches to help blind and partially sighted people identify their different credit, debit, and prepaid cards. The new cards were promoted in television ads featuring Dolby Atmos spatial audio and narration to reach the intended audience.

"The Touch Card is Mastercard's next step toward promoting inclusivity at scale," Rajamannar said at the time. By developing with accessibility in mind, "we strive to provide equal opportunity for all to benefit from the ease and security of a digital world."

MASTERCARD. BRYAN R. SMITH/GETTY IMAGES

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ON A MISSION OF ACCESS

Richelieu Dennis, 2025's Adcolor Beacon Award honoree, has built an empire on equity and community. ***By Mark Stenberg***

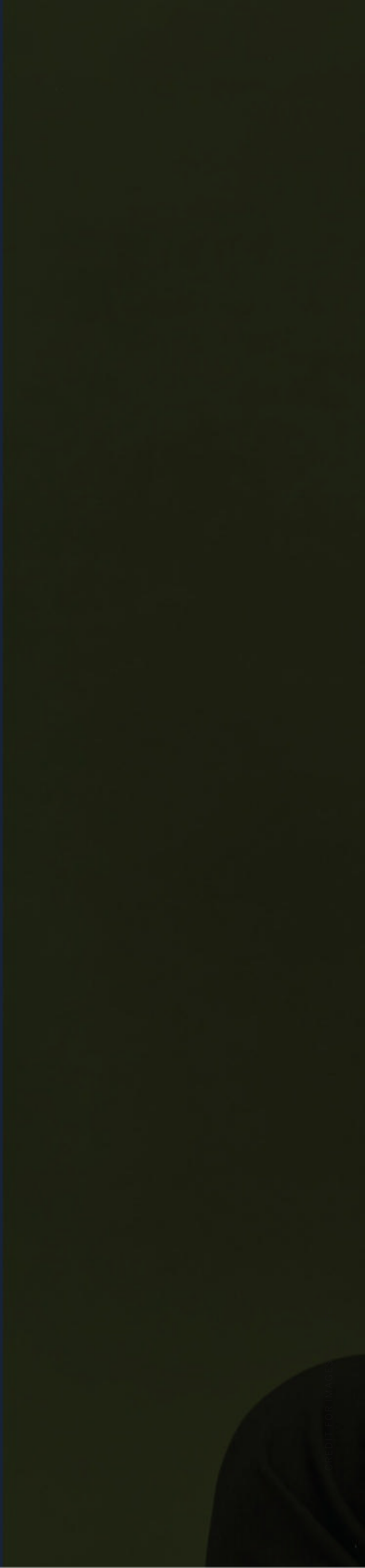
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DREW GURIAN

WHEN RICHELIEU DENNIS speaks about his work, he doesn't use language like "audiences" or "consumers." Instead, he talks about communities—their histories, needs, and how businesses can empower them.

It's an ethos rooted in his own story: a young refugee from war-torn Liberia who, alongside his mother, sold shea butter on the streets of Harlem before building one of the most successful beauty companies in U.S. history.

Decades later, Dennis' empire spans media, technology, venture capital, and culture itself. As the executive chairman of Sundial Media & Technology Group and founder of the New Voices Fund, he's turned that early entrepreneurial grit into a far-reaching effort to transfer ownership, wealth, and opportunity to underrepresented creators and founders.

This month, Adcolor is recognizing that work by honoring Dennis with its 2025 Beacon Award—a distinction reserved for leaders who rise up while reaching back.



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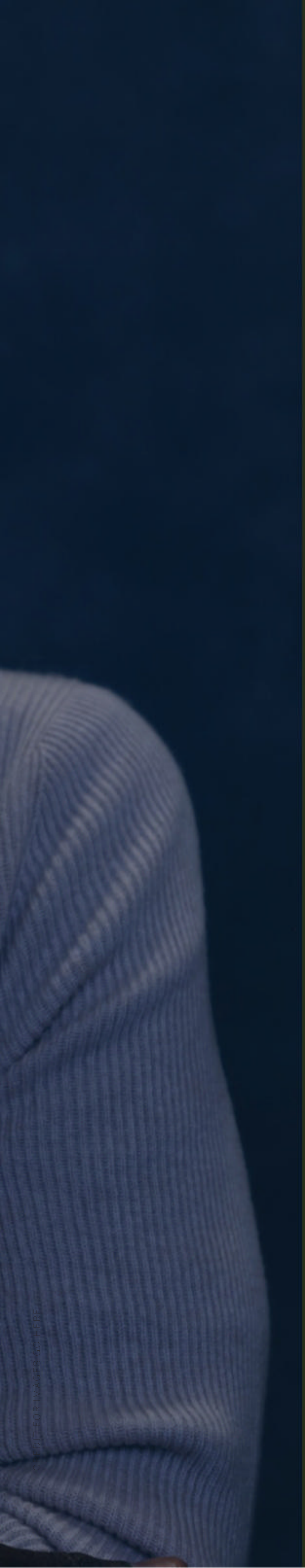
> “WE’RE NOT BROADENING OUR FOCUS—WE’RE EXPANDING OUR PORTFOLIO OF NICHES.



FROM SHEA BUTTER TO A BILLION-DOLLAR EXIT

Dennis' ascent began with Sundial Brands, the company behind SheaMoisture and Nubian Heritage, which he founded in 1991 with his mother and college roommate. In 2017, Unilever acquired Sundial in a landmark $1.6 billion deal, the largest consumer products transaction ever by a majority Black-owned company.

Rather than cash out, Dennis used the sale as a springboard to launch the New Voices Fund, a $200 million investment vehicle aimed at empowering women entrepreneurs of color. Its portfolio now spans more than 25 companies, including Mielle Organics and The Honey Pot Company—two of the most prominent success stories in modern beauty.

"The philosophy is simple," Dennis said. "We invest in the best of the best of the best. If you look where others aren't looking, that's where the opportunity—and the value—lives."

Today, Dennis' focus is on Sundial Media & Technology Group (SMTG), which he chairs alongside CEO Kirk McDonald. The company operates a growing network of cultural brands, including Essence, Refinery29, Afropunk, and Beautycon.

Under Dennis, SMTG is redefining what a media company can be by using data, technology, and AI to drive scale while deepening its relationships with the niche communities that shape culture.

"All of our brands are driven now by technology," Dennis said. "We're surrounding our people with the right tools to build more efficiently, to super-serve our audiences, and to give our communities access to these platforms so they can create for themselves."

McDonald describes working with Dennis as "not for the faint of heart," but deeply rewarding.

"His bandwidth is unusually high," McDonald said. "He's intellectually curious, a rabid learner, and he doesn't enter conversations assuming he's right. He's purpose-driven, but he believes he's just one vote among many."

That humility, combined with ambition, has allowed SMTG to expand quickly.

Since acquiring Refinery29 in 2024, the group has integrated Beautycon under the same umbrella, invested in the new professional league Grand Slam Track to amplify women's sports storytelling, and begun developing an AI platform trained exclusively on Essence content.

The tool, Dennis said, is designed not only to answer questions but to match community members with vetted opportunities—from jobs to mentorships—removing bias from the system in a way that reflects the values of the brand.

THE BUSINESS OF EQUITY

Those who know Dennis say his work is animated by one principle: access.

"He's most passionate about equity," McDonald said. "Not handouts—access. He wants the rules to be clear and the starting line to be fair, so meritocracy can take over."

That same commitment has guided his venture portfolio. The New Voices Fund invests across consumer goods, tech, and food and beverage companies, from Money Point, a fintech platform driving small-business transactions across Africa, to Caribé, a hydration brand rooted in Caribbean flavors.

"It's about finding excellence in overlooked places," Dennis said. "Whether we're building media brands or funding startups, it's the same philosophy."

Vivek Shah, CEO of digital media firm Ziff Davis, has come to admire both Dennis' vision and his values.

"He's one of the best people I've ever met," Shah said. "He's humble, generous, and he listens. He's built everything around supporting underserved communities—starting with SheaMoisture, continuing with Essence, and extending through New Voices. It's all connected by impact."

But the venture has not been without turbulence. In addition to SMTG, Dennis is also a co-founder of Group Black, a collective formed in 2021 to channel brand dollars into Black-owned media.

Dennis left Group Black in 2024 amid internal disagreement that has since escalated into dueling lawsuits. The situation has led Dennis to engage in litigation, through his SMTG subsidiary firm Essence Communications, against the collective he helped launch, alleging that Group Black owes SMTG brands $7 million in unpaid bills. Separately, SMTG is also engaged in an arbitration dispute with Vice Media, which sold Refinery29 to Sundial in April 2024, regarding an alleged breach of a transition services agreement.

Richelieu declined to comment on either matter. But those close to him say his decision to refocus on Sundial Media was as much about principle as pragmatism. "When he fights, it's not about getting money back," McDonald said. "It's about protecting trust."

That belief in integrity as a shared resource—one that communities must guard together—threads through every part of his empire.

For Dennis, the work ahead is about scaling that philosophy. He sees a future where culture, commerce, and technology intersect seamlessly, where ownership and creativity sit in the same hands.

"We're not broadening our focus," he said. "We're expanding our portfolio of niches. When you look at all these communities collectively, you realize they are the culture."

Samantha Skey, CEO of SHE Media, summed up what makes Dennis' impact enduring.

"He's a visionary," Skey said. "His mission has always been about ownership—who controls the platforms shaping culture. That's where the real change happens."

MARK STENBERG *is the senior media reporter at* **ADWEEK.**

19th Annual ADCOLOR AWARDS

The ADCOLOR Awards recognize those who embody the organization's mission of "Rise Up. Reach Back." On Nov. 14, ADCOLOR Awards honorees and nominees will be celebrated at Disney's Coronado Springs Resort in Orlando, Fla. The show will close out the organization's annual conference, taking place Nov. 11-13.

A CALL TO RAISE THE INDUSTRY HIGHER

by Tiffany R. Warren
Founder and President, ADCOLOR

Every year, ADCOLOR challenges our community to look inward and act outward. This year's theme, CTRL ALT LIFT, pushes us to address the inherited systems, switch off the default setting on ones that no longer serve us, and rise to build something better.

The truth is that we know better. We know that inequities persist in the creative industries. That history is being rewritten or worse, erased. That conversations about race, identity, and belonging are challenging. And we also know that silence is not neutrality, it's complicity.

The creative industry was built on the power of ideas. Ideas that shape perception, shift culture, and move not just products but hearts. That power comes with responsibility. This is just not the time for retreat behind closed doors. It is a moment to include more communities and increase the volume of voices whose stories still fight to be heard. Each campaign, lyric, frame, story, and post has the power to reinforce what divides us. It also has the power to remind everyone what unites us. Let's choose wisely.

So, I encourage each of you to raise our industries higher than compliance, higher than fear, higher than what we see and what we expect, because the future of creativity is not in the margins. It's in the movement.

Let's carry the legacies of those who paved the way and the dreams of those still finding their way. Let's walk boldly into a future we rewrite together. A future where community is always the hero in our collective story.

Let's control what we can. Alt what we must. Lift as we rise.

HONOREES

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

T.D. Jakes
Founder and Chairman,
T.D. Jakes Group

A thought leader, entrepreneur, and pastor, Jakes sees himself as a storyteller who elevates underrepresented voices by connecting faith, business, media, and culture. His work at the T.D. Jakes Group promotes equity across business, entertainment, philanthropy, real estate, and social impact.

Dani Monroe
Founder, Martha's Vineyard Summit, CenterFocus International, Inc.

Monroe has spent the last 40 years championing diversity, equity, and inclusion in Fortune 100 companies, positively driving their bottom lines and reputations. In 2022, she launched the Martha's Vineyard CDO Summit to bring together and support chief diversity officers.

Carmen Smith
SVP, Creative Development - Product, Content, and Inclusive Strategies, Disney Experiences, Walt Disney Imagineering, and Disney Consumer Products

The longtime "Imagineer" in Disney's research and development arm, Smith aims to bring joy to guests through immersive and inclusive experiences. As a creative executive, she recently brought Tiana's Bayou Adventure to life at Walt Disney World Resort and Disneyland Resort.

ADCOLOR | ADWEEK BEACON

Richelieu Dennis
Executive Chairman,
Sundial Group of Companies
See full story on page 16.

CATALYSTS

Mark Clennon
Artist, Studio Mark Clennon

Using his lens to capture the power of the Black experience, Clennon's work lives at the intersection of culture, portraiture, and storytelling. His pieces are part of the Whitney Museum's permanent collection, and he has collaborated with Apple, Nike, and other brands.

Diversability
ELEVATING DISABILITY PRIDE, TOGETHER

Diversability

Diversability is on a mission to elevate disability pride and build the power of this community. Founded by Tiffany Yu, who became disabled after a car accident at 9 years old, Diversability empowers disabled people through events and its work to help brands make their workplaces more accessible.

Stephanie Nadi Olson
Founder and Executive Chair of the Board, We Are Rosie

Years before the pandemic, the former ad executive was promoting diversity and flexible work at We Are Rosie, the advertising and creative services agency she launched in 2018. The agency gives 30,000 freelance marketing professionals opportunities to work with brands and agencies.

ADCOLOR IN MUSIC

EXECUTIVE

Ryan Ford
Co-founder, Currency

A lifelong hip-hop storyteller turned brand strategist, Ford has shaped how music moves culture and business. From his role of editor-in-chief at The Source to leading the sale and eventual exit from Cashmere and now co-founding Currency, Ford has built a career helping brands earn credibility in the music space through authenticity, creativity, and cultural connection.

ARTIST

KAYTRANADA
Grammy-winning DJ and Producer

KAYTRANADA is a Grammy-winning DJ and producer redefining the sound of modern dance music. From his breakout remix of Janet Jackson's "If" to his genre-blurring albums such as 99.9%, BUBBA, and AIN'T NO DAMN WAY!, he's built a global following by turning rhythm, culture, and emotion into an unmistakable groove.

ADVOCATE

Joe Hall

Founder, Ghetto Film School

Hall launched the Ghetto Film School in 2000 to develop and support aspiring underserved filmmakers in New York, Los Angeles, and London. Now he is working to raise the profile of the Manhattan Neighborhood Network, an award-winning cultural organization and the nation's largest community media center.

MOST VALUABLE PARTNERSHIP

Mielle Organics and P&G

Monique and Melvin Rodriguez co-founded Miele to fill a market void for textured hair care. They joined forces with P&G in 2023 to scale their vision, empower millions of Black women with high-quality products, and invest back in their community.

CAMPAIGN OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

Congratulations to all the ADCOLOR 2025 nominees, honorees and champions, including the Last Prisoner Project and the team at McCANN for creating a platform designed to right a historic injustice.

ADCOLOR McCANN

LAST PRISONER PROJECT
THE PEN TO RIGHT HISTORY

LEGENDS

George Felix
CMO, Chili's

How do you turn a brand around? Just ask Felix, who's done it at Old Spice, KFC, Pizza Hut, and Tinder. Since joining Chili's in 2022, Felix's clever social media strategies and marketing campaigns have helped the restaurant chain deliver five straight quarters of double-digit sales growth.

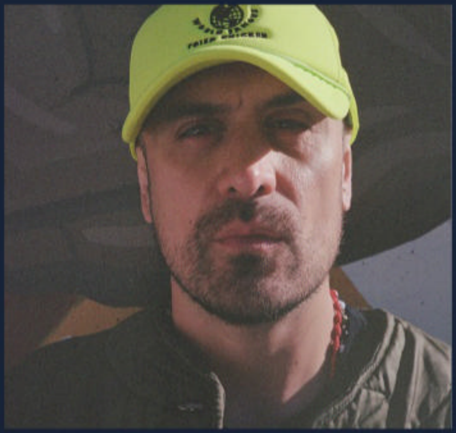
Sofia Hernandez
Global Head of Business Marketing & Commercial Partnerships, TikTok

Hernandez is a fervent advocate for inclusive leadership and diverse teams because they deliver superior results. She likes to describe her job as helping companies, large and small, become fluent in TikTok, which has become a multibillion-dollar global heavyweight during her time at the platform.

ADCOLOR ONE CLUB CREATIVES

Kaleeta McDade
Global Chief Experience Design Officer, VML

McDade works with brands to create emotional connections using technology, data, and innovation. She helped The Coca-Cola Company win Brand Marketer of the Year at Cannes as a member of the WPP Open X Global Creative Council and has held creative roles at Apple, Sapient Shanghai, Deloitte Digital, and Ogilvy.



Oved Valadez
Co-Founder and Executive Creative Director, INDUSTRY

With a background in product design and creative marketing, Valadez shapes culture through the power of creativity. He takes inspiration from his Mexican roots to "create like an immigrant," with a portfolio of global campaigns for Nike, Converse, YouTube Music, and other brands.

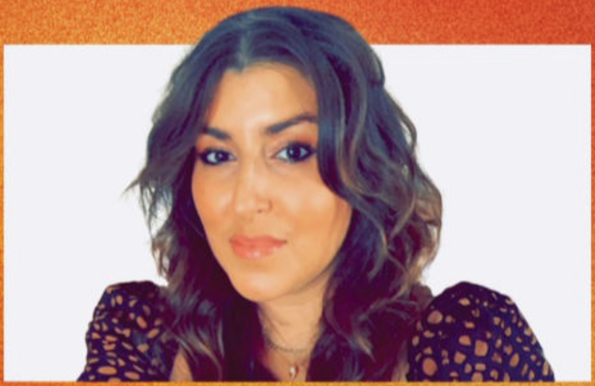
MR. ADCOLOR

Umar Issa
Head of Inclusive and Cultural Partnerships, Yahoo

MS. ADCOLOR

Jochebed Fekadu
Director, Marketing and Inclusion and Impact, Omnicom Precision Marketing Group

Congrats to Horizon Media's 2025 Class of ADCOLOR LEADERS



Farah Adib
SVP, Enterprise Operations & Delivery

Charisma Deberry
VP, Strategic Communications & Engagement

Horizon is proud to support ADCOLOR and celebrate our leaders who are moving the industry forward.

horizon

ADCOLOR
AWARDS

We Rise Up
We Reach Back

ADCOLOR | ADWEEK Beacon Award
Richelieu Dennis,
Sundial Group of Companies

ADCOLOR in Music Executive Award
Ryan Ford, Currency Advisory Group

ADCOLOR in Music Artist Award
KAYTRANADA, Grammy-Winning
DJ and Producer

ADCOLOR | One Club Creative Award
Kaleeta McDade, VML
Oved Valadez, INDUSTRY

Advocate Award
Joe Hall, Ghetto Film School

Catalyst Award
Diversability
Mark Clennon, Studio Mark Clennon
Stephanie Nadi Olson, We Are Rosie

Legend Award
George Felix, Chili's
Sofia Hernandez, TikTok

Lifetime Achievement Award
T.D. Jakes, T. D. Jakes Group
Dani Monroe, Martha's Vineyard Summit Center Focus International, Inc.
Carmen Smith, Walt Disney Imagineering

Most Valuable Partnership Award
Mielle + P&G

Mr. & Ms. ADCOLOR
Jochebed Fekadu, Omnicom Precision Marketing Group
Umar Issa, Yahoo

ADCOLOR Influencer Award Nominees
Leo González, Creator
Abigail Marquez, NYMA
Jayde Powell, The Em Dash Co.

ADCOLOR in Tech Award Nominees
Rosakebia Liliana Estela Mendoza, Silver Passport
Cintia Romero, Adobe
Asha Shivaji, SeeMe Index

Executive of the Year Award Nominees
Shannae Ingleton-Smith, Kensington Grey
Jay Kamath, HAYMAKER
Nidia Serrano, SiriusXM

Innovator Award Nominees
Gary Coichy, Pod Digital Media
Sam Hosein, Instrument
Kathryn Parsons, Havas Health Network

The Rising Star Award Nominees
Reana Johnson, United Talent Agency
Desiree Moore, NBA
Kaleb Mulugeta, Translation

The Rockstar Award Nominees
Jeremiah Abraham, Tremendous Communications, LLC
Kandace Barker, Initiative
Ri-Karlo Handy, The Handy Foundation | SunWise Media

The Campaign of the Year Award Nominees
"Now You See"
"The Pen to Right History"
"Perfectly Queer"
"See My Name"
"Sport Your Period"

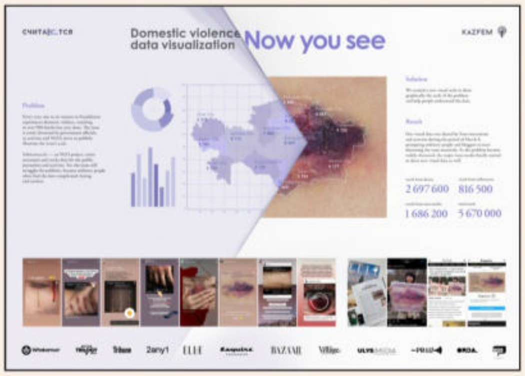
ADCOLOR LEADERS
Adrienne Lucas
Aisha L. Hudson
Amber Cabral
Andy Mathurin
Charisma Deberry
Cynthia Wolfe
D.J. Vaughn
Daniel P. Calderon
Danielle Cornejo Calhoun
Diana Pinedo
Eden Zeilo
Erica Mapa
Farah Adib
Frankie Yaptinchay
Jackie Palmer
Jessica Watson
Juie Shah
Khari Mpagazehe
Laura Sandoval
Lisa Bull
Marie Rojas
Michael Houston
Sam Hosein
Sara Porritt
Sharita Petersen
Shaun Mir
Tamara Mariam Dawit
Tia Washington
Victory O. Oshodin
Yogi Omar

ADCOLOR FUTURES
Abiola Ogunkoya
Allison Aragon
Andre Wilkes
Angelica Johnson
Chufue Yang
Elizabeth Gordon
Gabriella Ogude
Gloria Akinnibosun
Jay Towns
Jennifer Shyue
Kathleen Cruz
Kendall Herbert
Komal Pawar
Lauren Godwin
Mandi Nelson-Pagán
Monique Proverbs
Naomi Davis
Naomi Neal
Natalia C. Alfaro
Nicole Rodriguez
Robert Shettlewood
Sabrina Taveras
Savannah Eljaouhari
Simedar Jackson
Sinead Chang
Sophia Park
Thomas Lee
Tomicia Blunt
Vanesa Carrillo
Yasmin Ballew

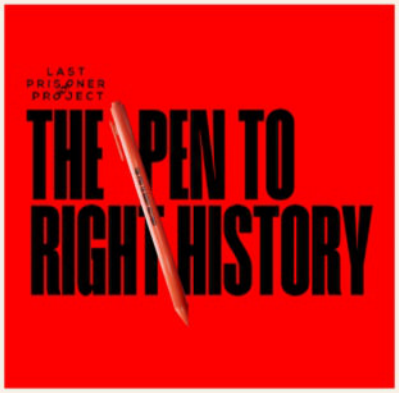
Ctrl + Alt + Lift

NOMINEES

CAMPAIGN OF THE YEAR


СЧИТАЮСЬ.ТСЯ
Domestic violence data visualization
Now you see
KAZFEM
2 697 600
816 500
1 686 200
5 670 000

"Now You See"
Client: Schitaetsya.kz
Agency: FCB
ARTGROUP Almaty


LAST PRISONER PROJECT
THE PEN TO RIGHT HISTORY

"The Pen to Right History"
Client: Last
Prisoner Project
Agency: McCann

Perfectly QUEER
glossary
thank you
rules

"Perfectly Queer"
Client: It Gets Better
Agency: Orci

"See My Name"
Client: Molson
Agency: Rethink

TORONTO
24
SPOONER
WE COVERED OUR NAME
SO HERS COULD BE SEEN.
PWHL

A TOOL TO CONFRONT PERIOD STIGMA
Forbes
VITAL TO KEEPING MORE GIRLS AND WOMEN IN SPORTS
INSPIRING PEOPLE TO ENGAGE IN SPORTS FEARLESSLY
knix
SPORT YOUR PERIOD.
Context
Idea
Execution
Results
+31
684%
400M
412%
39%

"Sport Your Period"
Client: Knix
Agency: Rethink

CREATOR OF THE YEAR

Leo González
Creator

Abi Marquez
Food Content Creator, NYMA

Jayde Powell
Founder and Social Strategist, The Em Dash Co.

ADCOLOR IN TECH

Rosakebia Liliana Estela Mendoza
CEO and Founder, Silver Passport

Cintia Romero
Senior Staff Designer, Product Equity, Adobe

Asha Shivaji
CEO and Co-founder, SeeMe Index

ADCOLOR EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR

Shannae Ingleton-Smith
CEO and Co-founder, Kensington Grey

Jay Kamath
Co-founder and Chief Creative Officer, HAYMAKER

Nidia Serrano
VP, Sales Marketing, SiriusXM Media

INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR

Gary Coichy
Founder and CEO, Pod Digital Media

Sam Hosein
Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, Instrument

Kathryn Parsons
VP, Content Strategy, Havas Health Network

RISING STAR

Reana Johnson
Inclusion Associate, United Talent Agency

Desiree Moore
Graphic Designer, Manager, National Basketball Association

Kaleb Mulugeta
Senior Creative, Translation

ROCKSTAR

Jeremiah Abraham
Founder and CEO, Tremendous Communications, LLC

Kandace Barker
Head of B2B, Initiative

Ri-Karlo Handy
Founder and CEO, Handy Foundation

Ctrl + Alt + Lift

We Move Together

ADCOLOR Could Not Happen Without You

5WPR • ADCOLOR Board of Directors • ADCOLOR Advisory Board
Adrianne Lipscomb Graphic Design • Bravely • Debut Capital
dirty sugar • DRKR PXLS Creative • EGM Security Management
Isa Beltre-Plush Merchandising Consultants
Squeaky.com • STAMP Event Co. • Studio Mark Clennon
the STUDIO NYC • Wendy Shanker

ADCOLOR
2025

INNOVATOR ADWEEK 50

IN 2025, THERE'S no such thing as business as usual. Faced with relentless challenges, change, and technological upheaval, brands have to devise new ways to stay culturally relevant and actually connect with people. The marketing and tech executives on our first-ever Innovator 50 list are breaking loose from industry norms and pioneering new ways of working, all the while leading with integrity. Whether it's lifting the curtain on digital advertising, transforming a social platform into a marketing intelligence engine, or using technology to surprise and delight, these executives are forging ahead with bold ideas and curiosity, while never losing sight of the people they serve.

By Brandon Hardin

IAN BAER

FOUNDER & CEO, Sooth

FOR DECADES, BRANDS have relied on demographics and past behavior, yet these signals explain just 7% of buying decisions, according to Ian Baer, a 30-year agency veteran who's solved business problems across the finance, automotive, healthcare, tech, and entertainment industries. With his company Sooth, which specializes in predictive and behavioral intelligence for marketers, Baer has flipped that logic on its head.

In May, Sooth launched its proprietary Emotional Logic Interface (Eli), a predictive AI system that decodes the emotional and behavioral drivers behind human decisions. Eli supercharges marketing by turning emotional data, gathered from 300 million people across 20 countries, into precise predictive guidance, helping brands know what to say, where to show up, and what will actually work—moves that can cut wasted spend by up to 80%.

Baer's mission is clear: eliminate "signal waste" and restore confidence in marketing. In an era of endless data and overblown hype, his human-centered approach to prediction is helping marketers finally see what's next.

SOOTH, RED ANTLER, SUPERGOOD

KISER BARNES

CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER & PARTNER, Red Antler

WHILE AI CAN often feel cold or complicated, Kiser Barnes is making it relatable. As partner and CCO at branding agency Red Antler, he's helped companies turn advanced tech into experiences people want to engage with. His approach—pairing technical credibility with emotional insight—has made Red Antler a go-to for AI-driven companies seeking connection.

At humanoid robotics firm Figure, Barnes replaced sterile engineering talk with a vision of progress grounded in optimism. For AI infrastructure startup Ori, he reframed computing power as creative potential. And he posed AI shopping platform Daydream as a companion that helps guide personal taste.

Beyond client work, Barnes has become a prominent voice for what he calls "creative symbiosis," where AI amplifies—not replaces—human creativity. From serving on AIGA's board to the Cannes Lions Design Jury, he's working to show how technology can be part of a future with empathy and integrity at its heart.

MIKE BARRETT

CO-FOUNDER & CSO, Supergood

WITH SUPERGOOD, MIKE Barrett is building the blueprint for AI-native agencies. While others chased hype, Barrett turned artificial intelligence into a working system that makes advertising faster, smarter, and more human. The patent-pending Supercharger platform fuses AI, data such as consumer profiles and academic research, and human creativity across every step of the workflow, doubling speed to market and delivering measurable results for Fortune 500 brands.

But Barrett's biggest move was not just developing but opening up Supercharger to other agencies through licensing, even making its Strategy Engine tool free for marketers, democratizing tools once locked behind closed systems.

Under his leadership, Supergood has built private, secure AI environments trusted by major enterprises and launched the first AI-powered financial services campaign "Power of Us" for U.S. Bank, making cutting-edge AI practical and trustworthy.

CHRIS BRANDT

PRESIDENT & CBO, Chipotle

BEING A MODERN marketer means making fandom, culture, and technology into your company's growth engine. Under Chris Brandt's leadership, Chipotle has harnessed social-first creativity and digital innovation to drive brand love and turn it into real results.

In the past year, Brandt launched the restaurant industry's first national college rewards program, tapping into Gen Z's loyalty and energy with Chipotle U Rewards. He turned an online meme into record-breaking sales with the "Tatted Like a Chipotle Bag" BOGO stunt, turning social conversation into real foot traffic. He also introduced Build-Your-Own Chipotle, a digital-exclusive family meal that rapidly scaled nationwide, and brought augmented reality to the table with a Snapchat lens that rewarded fans for scanning avocados.

Through creativity grounded in insight and powered by technology, Brandt has made Chipotle the model for how brands can turn attention into meaningful results.

JAMES CADWALLADER

CO-FOUNDER & CEO, Profound

AS CONSUMERS SHIFT from Google to generative tools like ChatGPT and Perplexity—over 60% now begin their product research with genAI—James Cadwallader saw what few did: the death of traditional SEO.

As online platforms speak to each other in new ways, Cadwallader has redefined how brands stay visible with Profound, an AI search optimization platform that pioneered helping marketers see how these new platforms describe their brands and generate content to improve those answers in real time. In two years, Profound has raised $58.5 million from Sequoia, Nvidia, and Khosla Ventures, and already serves over 500 enterprise brands including Ramp, Docusign, and Plaid, improving visibility by up to sevenfold.

Through cutting-edge research and tools like the AI Visibility Leaderboard, Cadwallader is helping brands keep up with the pace of change with the marketing tools to understand, measure, and master the next era of search.

GUY COHEN

CHIEF PRODUCT OFFICER, Skai

THE CONSTANT HYPE cycle around AI can make true innovation difficult to tell apart from the noise. Skai's Celeste stands out as a genuine breakthrough in commerce media. Built under the direction of CPO Guy Cohen, Celeste is a genAI marketing agent designed to act like a strategic teammate for marketers.

While the rest of the industry is focused on creative production or chatbot interface uses for AI, Celeste is designed to be a collaborator, verticalized and onboarded into an agency's system like a new hire that can convert human time spent cleaning and analyzing data into strategic planning, creative thinking, and client collaboration.

Trained on performance data from over 200 retailers and publishers, Celeste delivers insights and optimization recommendations that drive real results, helping over 100 brands and agencies achieve up to 50% efficiency gains and up to 20% performance lifts.

Cohen's model—focused on domain-specific intelligence, user trust, and tangible ROI—makes good on the productivity promise of AI.

CHIPOTLE, PROFOUND, SKAI

JP COLACO

SVP & CHIEF T-ADS OFFICER, T-Mobile

IT'S BEEN A year of transformative growth at T-Mobile Advertising Solutions (T-Ads) led by JP Colaco, that brought together digital, physical, and in-store touch points. His acquisitions of Vistar Media and Blis expanded T-Ads' reach to over 1.1 million DOOH screens and introduced privacy-forward, omnichannel targeting, bridging the gap between connected devices and real-world engagement.

At IAB NewFronts, JP unveiled T-Ads' turnkey retail media platform, empowering retailers to build in-store ad networks powered by T-Mobile's tech. He also launched near store activations with DOOH messages, which helped drive a 52% Android sales lift during a Google campaign.

With enhanced programmatic tools, new attribution models, and landmark deals with IPG, T-Ads is now delivering 61% more conversions at 29% lower CPAs. Through Colaco's leadership, T-Mobile has evolved from a telecom giant into a full-fledged media innovator shaping the future of omnichannel advertising.

KEREL COOPER

CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER, GumGum

B2B MARKETING IS finally getting a much-needed makeover. At GumGum, CMO Kerel Cooper has given the contextual intelligence firm a bold, emotional, and culturally fluent voice with his mantra of "think like B2C as a B2B company."

Among his standout moments were driving a 235% jump in panel attendance at Possible, followed by a DJ Khaled-hosted VIP dinner that turned cultural buzz into business momentum. Cooper's work drove real impact: Marketing-sourced revenue nearly tripled to $29.3 million this year. Internally, he overhauled GumGum's marketing engine, introducing OKRs, expanding product marketing, and building repeatable playbooks that fuse creativity with accountability.

Beyond the numbers, Cooper's influence extends across the industry as an adjunct professor at Kean University, his Minority Report podcast that elevates diverse voices, and supporting events founded and led by Black creators and business owners to open new pathways into marketing.

T-MOBILE, GUMGUM

Blue

JOHNNIE WALKER
Blue Label
Label

Please drink responsibly.
JOHNNIE WALKER BLUE LABEL Blended Scotch Whisky. 40% Alc/Vol. Imported by Diageo, New York, NY.

SEAN CORCORAN

PRESIDENT, MissionOne Media at BarkleyOKRP

FEW LEADERS HAVE reshaped modern media like Sean Corcoran. At Forrester, he pioneered the "paid, owned, earned" framework that has shaped media planning. At Mediahub, he embraced the challenger agency model to drive record growth. Now, as the president of MissionOne Media at BarkleyOKRP, he's led the agency to nearly $250 million in new business billings while rejecting principal media buying.

The 200-person full-funnel agency runs on creativity, data, and AI, while reasserting control and infusing curiosity back into the media business. He's integrated CRM and performance media under one roof, and launched tools like M1 Refinery that uses AI to decode why creative works.

From helping Red Lobster reinvent its loyalty program to launching a nostalgic AI streaming radio campaign for Slice, Corcoran's work demonstrates how creativity and media can amplify each other.

CHRISTOPHER CRAWFORD

FOUNDER & CEO, Elite Media

PUTTING COMMUNITY AT the heart of everything Elite Media does, Christopher Crawford isn't interested in agency business as usual. The founder and CEO has built a Black-owned independent agency that champions creativity with a purpose, partnering with brands like American Family Insurance that are looking for a a long-term creative partner while serving the communities where they do business.

Raised by an educator, in 2024 Crawford launched The Schoolys, a Harlem-based initiative to honor and empower educators. The first phase of the program delivered $150,000 in self-care and professional development grants to school staff, doubling retention and transforming morale. This year it's expanding to fund media labs, ongoing grant writing support, and enrichment programs.

Elite Media's grounded, equity-focused approach has earned recognition from the Effies, ADDYs, and beyond. Crawford's message to the industry is clear: Purpose isn't a buzzword but a way of doing business.

KRISTEN D'ARCY

CMO & HEAD OF DIGITAL GROWTH, True Religion

MAKING A LEGACY brand feel new again takes deep knowledge of its history and the new retail world it must adapt to. In two years as True Religion's CMO and digital growth lead, Kristen D'Arcy has elevated the 23-year-old denim label into a $450 million cultural powerhouse, seamlessly blending music, fashion, and authenticity.

Under her leadership, True Religion's "Own Your True" platform became a cultural moment from its launch with Brazilian singer Anitta during Super Bowl week, then amplified by Megan Thee Stallion, YG, and Sexyy Red at Coachella and Rolling Loud. Her strategies drove 3.5 billion impressions and a 100% surge in new online customers, with ecommerce nearing 50% of total sales.

D'Arcy's marketing budget is now 10% of revenue, up from 3% when she started. With organic endorsements from Kylie Jenner, Alix Earle, and Timothée Chalamet, she's proving that when brand and culture align authentically, influence becomes effortless.

MISSIONONE MEDIA, ELITE MEDIA, TRUE RELIGION

IMAGINE INNOVATION

From imagination to transformation,
Disney continues to set the pace for what’s possible.
With visionaries like Rita Ferro, innovation becomes
more than progress - it becomes **storytelling reimagined**.

We congratulate you.

RITA FERRO
PRESIDENT, GLOBAL ADVERTISING

Disney

INNOVATOR
ADWEEK 50

SETH DALLAIRE

EVP & CHIEF GROWTH OFFICER, Walmart U.S.

FOR THE RETAILER on top of the Fortune 500, staying there takes relentless innovation. As EVP and chief growth officer of Walmart U.S., Seth Dallaire is turning the world's biggest store into the world's most connected commerce ecosystem.

Under his leadership, Walmart has seen triple ecommerce growth, a surge in new profit streams like Walmart+ and retail media, and a bold rebrand powered by the "Walmart. Who Knew?" campaign that reframed the retailer as modern and unexpected.

Dallaire also architected Walmart's acquisition of Vizio, fusing retail, media, and entertainment to create new ways for brands to connect with consumers. Through Walmart Connect and its advanced data engine, Scintilla, he's pushed retail media into a full-funnel future, driving 31% YoY growth and reshaping how advertisers measure impact.

DOMENIC DIMEGLIO

CMO & CHIEF DATA OFFICER, Paramount Streaming

TO SUPERCHARGE FANDOMS and their dedicated audiences, Paramount Streaming's Domenic DiMeglio is merging data and creativity to reshape the streaming landscape. Overseeing Paramount+ and Pluto TV, he's turned insight into impact, driving a 29% global surge in viewing hours in Q2 2025 and 15% revenue growth across platforms.

His signature "Find Your Mountain" campaign transformed Paramount+ into a cultural playground. From AI-powered fan experiences like Paramount+ Fan Frontier—where audiences could claim digital plots on the Paramount Mountain—to unexpected mashups featuring SpongeBob SquarePants, Star Trek, Mean Girls, and Gladiator, DiMeglio's work connected storytelling across generations and fandoms, earning 81 million views and industrywide buzz.

At the same time, Pluto TV remains the global FAST leader, expanding its footprint and audience share. DiMeglio's mix of innovative ideas, data-driven precision, and emotional storytelling is setting a new gold standard for streaming marketing.

MARK DOUGLAS

FOUNDER & CEO, MNTN

AS FOUNDER AND CEO of MNTN, Mark Douglas has turned television into the next great performance marketing channel. An engineer-turned-visionary, Douglas personally helped build MNTN's Performance TV platform, making linear advertising as simple, targeted, and measurable as digital. Today, 97% of MNTN's clients are first-time TV advertisers—proof of how he's opened a once-exclusive medium to brands of all sizes.

He's also the architect behind MNTN Matched, an AI-powered tool that uses data and machine learning to connect brands with their best-fit streaming audiences. All of these efforts paid off this year, when Douglas led MNTN through a landmark IPO, valuing the company at $1.2 billion.

From the witty ROÁS All Day campaign at Cannes Lions to recognition as ADWEEK's 2023 Tech Innovator of the Year, MNTN under Douglas is making adtech accessible through his mantra: Make every screen work as hard as search.

WALMART, PARAMOUNT, MNTN

JAMISON DUFFIELD

GLOBAL HEAD OF STRATEGY, Virtue Wolrdwide

OVER THE PAST year, Jamison Duffield has pushed Virtue Worldwide into new territory with the Pigeon culture accelerator. Powered by AI, network analytics, and big data, Pigeon guides campaigns by mapping cultural dynamics, identifying meaningful entry points, and forecasting shifts.

The tool leverages Duffield's philosophy of "contribution over disruption," which guides brands through actively participating in culture to drive engagement and deliver growth without relying on interruptive tactics. This approach has driven standout results such as Poppi's Super Bowl campaign propelling the prebiotic soda to the top of YouGov's brand perception rankings, while Gallo Wines is connecting with younger audiences by entering overlooked cultural conversations.

Pigeon also informs Vice's global media ecosystem, surfacing emerging trends and insights that strengthen both editorial and client work.

BRANDON EDWARDS

CO-FOUNDER & CEO, Unlock Health

AT THE CENTER of Brandon Edwards' leadership strategy is the belief that marketing can be a force for change within the healthcare field, whether it's patient acquisition, workforce recruitment, or brand strategy.

The co-founder and CEO of Unlock Health has applied this philosophy across groundbreaking initiatives such as crafting 20 condition-specific health risk assessments that lowered acquisition costs by nearly half for clients like Franciscan Health; Nebraska Medicine's "Together. Extraordinary." campaign that boosted applications by 36% and cut voluntary turnover by 15%; and University of Iowa Health Care's brand unification that increased impressions by 284% and conversions by 46%.

Earlier this year, Edwards also published a book, Authentic Healthcare Marketing, pairing research and practical tools to show that authenticity drives trust, loyalty, and conversions. By turning authenticity into a measurable strategy, he's created a blueprint for connecting meaningfully with audiences.

VIRTUE WORLDWIDE, UNLOCK HEALTH

JOE FERENCZ

FOUNDER & CEO, Gamefam

WHAT BEGAN AS an experiment in gaming marketing has become the leading metaverse company for reaching Gen Z and Gen Alpha audiences. Joe Ferencz founded Gamefam in 2019 as the first professional game development studio on Roblox, and has since partnered with brands including the NFL, Paramount, and Intuit to create immersive experiential campaigns like playable movie trailers and a digital World Cup trophy reveal for FIFA.

When fans don't just watch ads but play them, they become co-authors in a brand's story, fostering the kind of brand loyalty that's powered over 45 billion lifetime visits to Gamefam activations. And beyond the work, Ferencz's multimillion-dollar Creator Fund invests in diverse young developers, supporting the careers of talent who grew up on these platforms.

RITA FERRO

PRESIDENT OF GLOBAL ADVERTISING, The Walt Disney Company

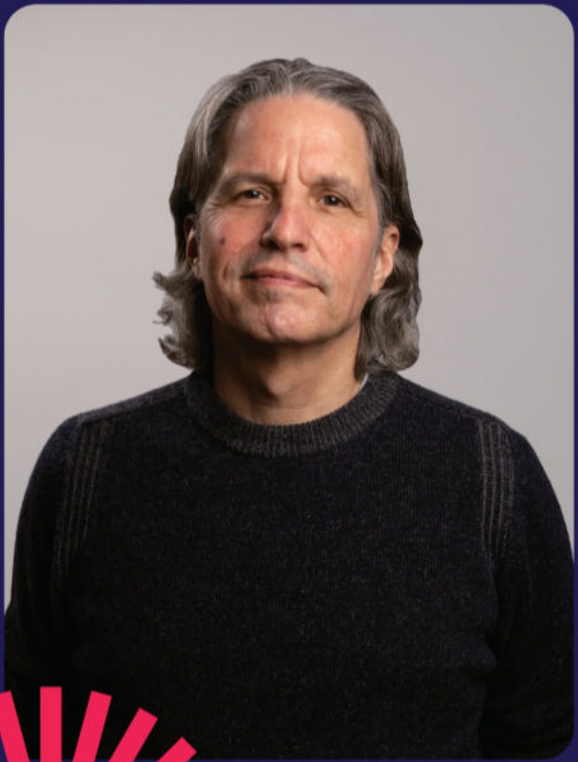
FEW EXECUTIVES ARE shaping the future of advertising like Rita Ferro. The global advertising president at The Walt Disney Company has turned the triple threat of Disney+, Hulu, and ESPN+ into the most advanced ad platform in entertainment, reaching 157 million ad-supported monthly users worldwide and setting a new standard for scale, innovation, and storytelling.

At Disney's Global Tech & Data Showcase, Ferro unveiled breakthroughs like the Disney Select AI Engine, Magic Words Live contextual targeting, and Disney Compass, giving brands unprecedented precision and creative flexibility. Disney Advertising also introduced Live Certification for key adtech partners, allowing brands to transact during peak engagement moments with advanced biddable capabilities.

As a result, Disney's 2025-2026 upfront delivered higher streaming and sports sales, and a sold-out Oscars show with the most diverse lineup of advertisers ever. By fusing data, technology, and creativity, Ferro is shaping how Disney can better reach audiences everywhere.

MARK FIGLIULO

FOUNDER & CREATIVE CHAIRMAN, Fig



WHEN PLANNING TO open Fig 13 years ago, Mark Figliulo had a new type of data-driven creative agency in mind. Bringing 30 years of creative agency experience to the table, he knew there had to be a better way to measure its effectiveness than consumer response or media performance data. So he built StoryData, a proprietary AI tool that assesses stories as a new kind of data source, replacing backward-looking metrics with forward-looking insights.

StoryData enables creatives to quantify essential variables like meaningfulness, brand identity, emotion, and differentiation to hone their narratives. The technology has propelled Fig to 30% revenue growth in 2025, with AOR duties for Tropicana and wooing Publix Supermarkets away from a 33-year agency partnership.

This fall, Figliulo is spinning off StoryData into a separate company, a move he hopes will help drive the future of creative work for the whole advertising industry.

GAMEFAM, THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY, FIG

Game Changer

BOLD IDEAS. RADICAL IMPACT.

Congratulations to Chris Crawford, Founder and CEO of Elite Media, on being named by ADWEEK as one of 2025's Top 50 Innovators.

ELITE MEDIA

INNOVATOR ADWEEK 50

NICK GALLO

FOUNDER & CEO, Loop

LOOP TOOK THE agency world by storm this year, quickly developing a reputation for radical stunts and bold campaigns for well-known brands that made people feel like they were seeing them for the first time.

At the helm of the small creative studio is founder and CEO Nick Gallo, who gets his production chops from HQ Trivia, Adult Swim and The Onion, using his deep understanding of the internet and love for the craziest idea to create captivating content. Among them was crafting the World's Hardest Captcha to promote Sam Altman's World that gained 2.5 million impressions, a parody of The Bear starring Duo the Owl, and creating playable ads with Samsung Game Breaks.

Loop has plenty of accolades to show for it. Among the 66 Webbys, Clios, and other awards it won this year, the agency's revenue increased by 134% with 147% growth in its client roster, among them Lionsgate, Visa, and Tripadvisor.

ARIELLE GARCIA

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, Check My Ads

ADTECH IS COMPLICATED by design—look closely, and you'll find grievances big enough to warrant a federal antitrust trial against Google. Arielle Garcia, COO of nonprofit online advertising watchdog group Check My Ads, broke down the lengthy courtroom proceedings with news articles, social posts, and even illustrations without losing the technical nuances, making the topic more relevant and accessible to anyone with an interest in the open web.

Garcia has been an innovative force in the digital advertising space for over a decade. But the Google trial took her beyond highlighting the problem to fixing it from the inside, becoming an expert source for everyone from journalists to politicians, even building a coalition of 14 civil society groups invested in the outcome.

She's also since become involved in crafting regulatory policy, promoting Check My Ads' goal of an accountable and transparent ad ecosystem in the halls of Congress.

DAN GARDNER

CO-FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN, Code and Theory Network

IN A YEAR when most agencies played defense, Code and Theory Network co-founder and chair Dan Gardner expanded, innovated, and set a new standard for how creativity and technology work together to drive growth.

Gardner's curiosity for what's next fuels his momentum. He launched The Human Design Framework to help leaders navigate the rise of AI and built The Machine, an AI-powered orchestration layer that boosted productivity by 35% across Stagwell's global network. His Engine prototyping studio shipped more than 40 AI concepts in a year, while the AI Accelerator turned hype into impact with tools like ContextLens for RealClearPolitics.

The agency's 12% revenue growth this year is also due to Gardner's strategic acquisitions to expand the business in the MENA region, plus deals with the AI elite including OpenAI, Google, and Adobe. In an era of disruption, Gardner has engineered the modern creative company.

LOOP, CHECK MY ADS, CODE AND THEORY NETWORK

MICHELLE GELMAN

(FORMER) HEAD OF GLOBAL CONTENT PRODUCT, Nielsen

AS STREAMING REWRITES the rules of television, Michelle Gelman made sure the industry could keep up. Among the biggest changes she brought to the measurement game as Nielsen's head of global content product was Big Data + Panel measurement, the industry's first accredited hybrid solution powered by data from 45 million homes. The result is a single, trusted view of where and how audiences are watching, used by every major publisher from Disney to NBCU to transact during the 2025–2026 Upfronts.

Gelman also launched Nielsen's first-party live streaming measurement, an accredited solution that gives networks and advertisers an unprecedented look into live sports and events on platforms like Amazon and Netflix, and expanded out-of-home viewership to 100% of the U.S.

Measurement is no longer a metric of the past—it's a glimpse of a moment as it happens.

BRYAN GOLDBERG

FOUNDER & CEO, BDG

WHILE OTHER DIGITAL media companies are contracting, Bryan Goldberg is expanding the capabilities of Bustle Digital Group. As CEO, he's turned BDG from a digital publisher into a full-fledged cultural network where editorial storytelling, live experiences, and creator access all work in sync for advertisers.

The standout example of Goldberg's strategy is Nylon Membership, which connects brands directly to creators and tastemakers. Within its first week, thousands of influencers applied, eager to join a community that offers both cultural cachet and commercial opportunity.

Experiential marketing now accounts for 20% of BDG's total revenue, fueled by signature events like Nylon House at Coachella and Desert Disco at Stagecoach, which together brought in nearly $5 million in sponsorships. Under Goldberg's leadership, BDG is back to building trends rather than chasing them, offering advertisers a rare blend of access, influence, and authenticity in the moments that shape culture.

NIELSEN, BDG

NADIA GONZALEZ

FOUNDER & CEO, ENC^2

B2B ADTECH FIRMS have a sameness problem. That's where Nadia Gonzalez's ENC^2 comes in to remake them into differentiated global businesses.

Gonzalez has built a career helping to turn technical innovation into market momentum. She's guided companies like Olyzon, AdLib, Venatus Media, and Welect in crafting compelling narratives that accelerate growth and attract investors.

Her expertise spans strategy, storytelling, and positioning, skills honed while scaling startups like Orchard Platform, Sociomantic Labs, and Admeld, all of which were successfully acquired by major players including American Express and Google.

Beyond client work, she advises investors such as Jim Payne of Breakpoint Capital and supports emerging ventures through First Party Capital.

NATALIE GORDON

FOUNDER & CEO, Babylist

WHEN TARIFFS THREATENED to spike the cost of baby essentials by up to 145% early this year, Babylist founder Natalie Gordon didn't just speak out—she mobilized an entire industry. Her "End the Baby Tax" campaign united nearly 30 competitor brands including Uppababy, Frida, and Ergobaby, transforming policy outrage into a national movement. With a full-page Washington Post ad, a Nasdaq billboard takeover, and more than 1 billion media impressions, Gordon turned a pricing crisis into a platform for advocacy.

At the same time, she matched words with action. Tools like price alerts and the new Open to Secondhand registry feature—used for more than 500,000 items in six months—helped families save money while promoting sustainability.

Under Gordon's leadership, Babylist has become more than a registry. It's a $500 million business powered by empathy, innovation, and purpose, showing how the strongest brands don't just sell to families, they advocate for the next generation.

ELAV HORWITZ

GLOBAL HEAD OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS & AI SOLUTIONS, WPP

OVER THE LAST two decades, Elav Horwitz has turned complex technology into business results for global brands like L'Oréal, GM, Nestlé, and McCann Worldgroup. At WPP, she heads up strategic partnerships and AI solutions, helping clients harness generative AI, XR, and Web3 to create campaigns and experiences that scale. Her teams have built global C-suite innovation councils, translating emerging tech into measurable impact and guiding organizations through digital transformation.

Beyond client work, Horwitz mentors AI startups, empowers female founders, and champions responsible tech, serving as a founding member of women's leadership network Chief and advisor to the Meta Creative Council. Her work has been recognized by Cannes Lions and She Runs It, and she frequently speaks at global industry events, sharing actionable insights on strategy, creativity, and technology.

Through her work, Horwitz translates emerging tech into creative solutions that deliver results for brands and audiences alike.

ENC^2, BABYLIST, WPP

Congratulations

Domenic DiMeglio

An honoree in the ADWEEK Innovator 50

For the past 20+ years, Domenic hasn't just shaped our strategy—he's shaped our culture with his vision, innovation, compassion and deep commitment to people. This is our opportunity to shout from the top of Paramount Mountain: **he's one of the greats!**

Paramount
STREAMING

JEREMY JONES

GLOBAL HEAD OF CREATIVE, Intuit Intuition

MAILCHIMP'S IN-HOUSE STUDIO Intuit Intuition (formerly Wink) has become a hub for bold, culturally resonant creative under Jeremy Jones. He emphasizes the power of bold ideas and new technologies to remind people why your brand matters, embodied in this year's "Email Is Dead" activation at SXSW Sydney. Visitors explored email's past, present, and speculative future with interactive installations, a personality test, and even a signature scent, showing that while the old way of doing email is indeed passé, Mailchimp has figured out its next iteration.

Jones' team of 50 experiments at the intersection of AI and human creativity, with generative AI's sometimes strange results complementing Intuit Intuition's established "expertly absurd" aesthetic. The AI Remix project reimagined Mailchimp's extensive brand archive, culminating in "Pop Up Like It's Hot," an AI-powered music video that transformed list-building tactics into cultural commentary. What will they make us rethink next?

JENNIFER KATTULA

CMO, Microsoft Advertising

MICROSOFT ADVERTISING HAS become a proving ground for AI-powered marketing with Jennifer Kattula at the helm. Over the past year, her team has integrated tools like Copilot, conversational ad formats, and AI-driven campaign optimization, delivering measurable impact: 73% higher clickthrough rates, 16% stronger conversions, 33% shorter customer journeys, and 53% more purchases within 30 minutes of interaction.

Kattula has fostered a culture of experimentation, embedding AI fluency into workflows, daily practices, and companywide hackathons, freeing teams to focus on ideation and creative problem-solving. Her "fewer, bolder, better" approach guides campaigns toward high-impact moments, while forums like the Innovation Council ensure solutions address real-world advertiser needs.

By blending human creativity with AI, Kattula is showing marketers how to work smarter, faster, and more creatively, with results that resonate within companies as well as with their customers.

GABI KNIGHT

GLOBAL DIRECTOR OF INTERNATIONAL MARKETING, Meta Reality Labs

IN JUST A year at Meta Reality Labs, Gabi Knight has transformed how immersive technology connects with global audiences. Leading marketing outside the U.S. and Canada, she spearheaded the international rollout of Ray-Ban Meta AI glasses across Europe, Australia, and beyond, while positioning Quest headsets and the Oakley Meta launch in key markets.

Her "culture-to-culture" approach treats each market as unique, crafting campaigns that honor local nuances while keeping a universal appeal. By blending PR, influencer partnerships, demand-generation channels, and cultural activations, she's turned launches into "surround sound" experiences that feel native to each region.

Knight's strategy bridges technology and lifestyle, showcasing Meta's wearables as immersive hardware that can live authentically within aspirational cultural moments such as Cannes, Wimbledon, and Monaco F1.

INTUIT INTUITION, MICROSOFT, META

MAYA LASRY

CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER, Seven Bucks Companies

FEW MARKETERS JUGGLE Hollywood blockbusters, personal brands, and product launches quite like Maya Lasry. As chief marketing officer of Seven Bucks Companies, she's built a mighty marketing engine around Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson's universe by leading with authenticity and heart.

Lasry's team helped turn Moana 2 into a global sensation before it hit theaters with a trailer that broke Disney channel viewership records accompanied by a campaign rooted in Johnson's Polynesian roots.

In the consumer products realm, the debut of Johnson's men's hygiene brand Papatui was amplified with a message of compassion and inclusivity, generating massive organic buzz on social media.

And for WrestleMania 40, Lasry crafted a multi-month storytelling arc that transformed Johnson's in-ring return into a cross-platform cultural event.

By orchestrating campaigns that are personal, authentic, and transmedia in scope, Lasry has set a new standard for celebrity marketing.

TRACY-ANN LIM

GLOBAL CHIEF MEDIA OFFICER, JPMorganChase

JPMORGANCHASE'S MARKETING IS pushing boundaries under the human-centered, tech-forward approach of Tracy-Ann Lim.

Her Summer of Sapphire campaign infused a credit card with the cool sensibility of the fashion world, driving record-high engagement. She also spearheaded the financial giant's first AI use case, adding 20% capacity to her team by automating workflows, planning, and reporting. Her approach isn't about hype; it's about unlocking practical, measurable impact while ensuring transparency and accessibility across the advertising ecosystem.

Lim's work on privacy as strategy has established an industry-leading framework for data compliance, widely recognized by partners like LiveRamp and Integral Ad Science. She's also an outstanding supporter of a robust journalism industry, teaching other marketers how to reach people in brand-safe ways.

Through innovation and advocacy, Lim has elevated standards across her organization and beyond, showing that creativity and integrity can scale together.

SEVEN BUCKS COMPANIES, JPMORGANCHASE

JEREMY LOWENSTEIN

CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER, Milani Cosmetics

HOW DO YOU make an indie beauty brand stand out among an industry full of giants? For Milani Cosmetics, the answer has been creativity over cash. Under CMO Jeremy Lowenstein, Milani has climbed to No. 7 in the competitive eye, lip, and face category—the only independently owned brand in the top 10.

Lowenstein's challenger mindset fuels everything from witty, nostalgia-driven campaigns to bold cultural collaborations. His in-house team's "America's Next Top Primer" spoofed early-2000s reality TV, racking up 600 million unique views and making Milani's Smoothing Primer the No. 2 new primer launch of 2025. Meanwhile, the "Face Set. Mind Set." campaign brought beauty and sport together, featuring athletes like Jordan Chiles and Sabrina Ionescu and generating 5.6 billion impressions.

With Milani now sold in 40 countries, Lowenstein is proving that authenticity and humor—not just budget—can win big in beauty.

HARVEY MA

VP & GENERAL MANAGER, Sam's Club Member Access Platform

RETAIL MEDIA HAS long been about ad placements, but at Sam's Club it's becoming something far more immersive. In a little more than a year, Harvey Ma has evolved the Sam's Club Member Access Platform (MAP) into what he's dubbed a retail experience network, seamlessly blending ads into the shopping journey.

Through innovations like Omni Experiences, MAP campaigns now merge digital touch points with real-world activations such as tailgates, back-to-school events, even race-day takeovers. One such campaign delivered a 9.6% sales lift and brought in 40% new buyers.

Ma also launched Omni-Impact, a measurement platform powered by first-party Sam's Club membership data, giving advertisers full-funnel clarity across onsite, offsite, and in-club media. MAP campaigns now drive an average 27% sales lift—up to 50% for new items—while Scan & Go ads see 10x higher clickthrough rates, proving the power of retail media that adds value for shoppers.

CHENLIN MENG

CO-FOUNDER, Pika

AI VIDEO GENERATOR Pika was founded in 2023, after Chenlin Meng and Demi Guo took the path familiar to many tech founders: abandoning their degree programs—at Stanford University's AI Lab, no less. Two years later, their free app has racked up over 16 million users drawn to its simple interface for producing videos in various styles with a simple text prompt or still image. The app's revolutionary Predictive Video feature, launched this fall, can generate clips without the need for complicated prompt engineering, including the script and soundtrack. The company is closing in on a $500 million valuation, having raised $135 million from investors including Github's Nat Friedman and Lightspeed Venture Partners.

MILANI COSMETICS, SAM'S CLUB, PIKA

“There’s no I in innovation.”
— Kern Schireson

“A hulking nerd.”
— Michael Kassan

“I thought Ross was CEO.”
— David Droga

“Please stop calling me.”
— Mark Cuban

“This is exhausting.”
— Kasha Cacy

“Is he the taller one?”
— *ADWEEK*

Congratulations
to our Chairman & CEO

KERN SCHIRESON

ADWEEK Innovator 50

Known

ADRIENNE MORGAN

PRESIDENT & HEAD OF PERFORMANCE MARKETING, Stripe Theory

PERFORMANCE MARKETING ISN'T just about clicks and conversions anymore—and Adrienne Morgan is showing the industr what's next. At strategic marketing agency Stripe Theory, she's fused creativity and technology to drive growth for global brands including Amazon, Google, and Nissan.

Her biggest move to date is launching Kai, Stripe Theory's proprietary AI engine that turns real-time data such as media coverage and social chatter into predictive insights and optimization recommendations. The platform has driven 12% organic growth for the agency and double-digit ROI gains for top clients.

Morgan has also transformed how teams work, bringing data scientists, media strategists, and creatives together to experiment and innovate in real time. It's a model that's inspired agencies across the industry to rethink how they deliver value.

By marrying AI intelligence with human ingenuity, Morgan is shaping what performance marketing will look like in the next era of advertising.

AILA MORIN

CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER, Merit

IN A BEAUTY world obsessed with constant drops and viral trends, Aila Morin is betting on something rarer: patience. As CMO of Merit, she's helped push the makeup brand to $100 million in revenue last year by slowing things down, launching just five products (half the industry norm) while deepening consumer connection through storytelling and design.

Instead of chasing hype, Morin crafts campaigns that start before a product even exists. Working backwards, she creates a cohesive brand story during the production stage, which inspires bespoke campaigns for each product.

To promote Merit's first fragrance, Retrospect, she enlisted five female photographers to evoke individuality. Pitching the brand's tinted sunscreen The Uniform to city dwellers rather than beachgoers generated $1 million in sales in its first week.

Through knowing Merit's audience and speaking to them in artful ways, Morin's beauty marketing is an unconventional success story firmly rooted in marketing best practices.

BRYAN QUINN

CO-FOUNDER, Shopsense AI

WHAT IF EVERY moment of attention could turn into a moment of commerce? That's the concept behind Shopsense AI, co-founded by Bryan Quinn, and it's changing how publishers make money.

Instead of sending audiences off-site, Shopsense layers lightweight AI directly into video, audio, and editorial content, identifying product moments and surfacing shoppable offers in real time—all within the publisher's own environment.

The impact is big: Shopsense now powers native commerce for Disney, Paramount, Univision, Tubi, CW, and BuzzFeed, connecting to more than 1,250 retailers. By keeping transactions and attribution in-platform, Quinn has given publishers new ways to monetize attention while maintaining editorial integrity and first-party data ownership.

Drawing on his decade at Amazon, Quinn has built not just a product but a new playbook for the attention economy—one where inspiration and transaction happen in the same moment, without leaving the story.

STRIPE THEORY, MERIT, SHOPSENSE AI

GITA REBBAPRAGADA

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, Crunchyroll

CRUNCHYROLL ISN'T JUST a streaming platform anymore—it's a global cultural phenomenon. COO Gita Rebbapragada has been driving that transformation, leading a global rebrand in 2024 that united Crunchyroll and Funimation, launching at San Diego Comic-Con with a two-day fan event and live concert that earned Clio and Muse awards. The campaign set a new benchmark for how entertainment brands can turn identity shifts into cultural moments, making a corporate change into a celebratory moment for fans.

Rebbapragada also scaled Crunchyroll's localization and dubbing, with over a dozen languages supported, and rolling out global weekly simulcasts across over 200 countries. On the theatrical front, she's brought anime to theaters with smash hits Mugen Train and Demon Slayer: Infinity Castle.

She's also thinking beyond the usual anime fanbase with cross-cultural partners like MLB and J Balvin, and has led published research on Gen Z fandom. Her strategies have fueled a 30% subscriber increase, now surpassing 17 million.

CRUNCHYROLL, AKKIO

JON REILLY

CO-FOUNDER & CEO, Akkio

MEDIA TEAMS NO longer have to wait days to turn data into action. Jon Reilly co-founded Akkio with the goal of anyone being able to converse naturally with massive datasets and get actionable insights in minutes. Removing those technical barriers has helped companies like Horizon Media, where audience-building speeds increased 150x, letting strategists test multiple scenarios in real time.

Reilly's platform handles complex datasets with ease, and with the help of LG Ad Solutions even cracked the code on television's holy grail: automatic content recognition data, transforming a previously manual, time-intensive process into instant intelligence accessible to entire teams. The technology is also approachable, with a patented conversational AI interface that lets users interact with data without specialized knowledge, automatically generating code from natural language prompts.

By democratizing access to strategic insights, Reilly is changing how the advertising ecosystem handles media planning, audience analysis, and campaign optimization.

JOE ROOT

CO-FOUNDER & CEO, Permutive

IN A PROGRAMMATIC world challenged by declining third-party data, Joe Root has shifted how the advertising ecosystem collaborates on first-party signals. He transformed Permutive from a publisher-focused data management platform into a global data collaboration hub connecting publishers, brands, agencies, and retail media networks.

Root's platform blends predictive analytics, privacy-safe data clean rooms, and curation tools into one system, giving publishers control of their assets while enabling advertisers to reach audiences previously inaccessible with traditional deterministic models. Campaigns like Sky's, powered by Permutive's predictive approach, unlocked incremental audiences and delivered performance on par with major walled gardens, showing that premium publisher inventory can drive impressive outcomes.

By making privacy-compliant, first-party data actionable at scale, Root has created a blueprint for the open internet that balances performance, security, and collaboration. His work is equipping the industry to achieve superior results while maintaining trust—practically unheard of in programmatic advertising.

KERN SCHIRESON

CHAIRMAN & CEO, Known

KNOWN IS HAVING its biggest year yet, powered by CEO Kern Schireson's bold blend of creativity, data science, and AI. The independent, employee-owned agency secured more than two dozen new business wins—including Disney, HP, Publix, NBCU, and the U.S. Olympic Committee—while expanding relationships with clients like Moderna, Amazon, and Meta.

A driving force behind this momentum is Skeptic, Known's patented automation and optimization platform. With 70 applications, Skeptic predicts and persistently optimizes media and creative across every channel. Daily use by teams—and now direct client access—has delivered more than $500 million in incremental ROI, with engineering rolling out up to three new capabilities per week.

Schireson's approach marries human craft with AI efficiency, enabling campaigns that are both creative and scientifically optimized. By integrating technology, transparency, and high-touch client partnerships, Known is turning complex data into actionable insight, powering more than $1 billion in annual client marketing investment.

MATTHEW SEGAL

CO-FOUNDER & CO-CEO, ATTN:

ATTN: HAS GROWN from a viral social publisher into a powerhouse creative agency by turning attention into action. Co-CEO Matthew Segal brings his keen sense of culture and storytelling to help the agency land global clients like TikTok, AT&T, Amazon, and Meta, driving three consecutive years of eight-figure revenue and 51% year-over-year growth in 2024.

Segal has guided ATTN: in creating campaigns that blend social, entertainment, and brand messaging. Notable initiatives include TikTok's Change Makers and Diverse Creators programs, helping 4,000 creators from marginalized communities grow their presence, and the Meta AI launch, which broke adoption records. ATTN: also delivered the debut TV campaign for Tracee Ellis Ross' Pattern brand, generating over 2 billion earned media impressions, and produced the PGA Tour's social-first Truth or Putt series with comedian Druski.

ATTN: thrives by staying true to the principles Segal co-founded it with: speed, innovation, and cultural fluency.

PERMUTIVE, KNOWN, ATTN:, SEEME INDEX, STAGWELL

ASHA SHIVAJI

CO-FOUNDER & CEO, SeeMe Index

INCLUSIVITY IS A GROWTH driver, and the proof is in Asha Shivaji's work at SeeMe Index. As co-founder and CEO, she launched the first AI-powered system measuring representation across six identity dimensions and three brand components—ads, products, and external commitments—turning a traditionally subjective topic into actionable data.

Her system, in partnership with Circana, has shown striking results: Inclusive beauty brands grow 2.7x faster than less inclusive competitors, and in OTC Health & Wellness, the gap is even wider at 4x faster growth. These insights have prompted Fortune 100 companies to rethink marketing strategies, ensuring campaigns reflect the diversity of their audiences.

SeeMe Index's annual CPG benchmarks have set new industry standards, forcing brands to confront representation gaps with measurable, AI-driven metrics. By combining technology with cultural insight, Shivaji has positioned inclusivity as a tangible competitive advantage that drives both engagement and market performance.

BETH SIDHU

CHIEF BRAND AND COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER, Stagwell

WHEN STAGWELL SET up shop on the beaches of Cannes, it wasn't to hand out swag or pitch clients—it was to play. What started as a single PowerPoint slide from Beth Sidhu, Stagwell's chief brand and communications officer, has grown into Sport Beach, the festival's hottest ticket and a multimillion-dollar business.

Sidhu reimagined brand networking through the universal language of sport, where Fortune 100 CMOs shoot hoops with Olympians and ideas spark on the pickleball court. Since the first Sport Beach in 2023, attendance has jumped to 6,000, athlete participation has more than doubled to 45 stars including Serena Williams and Alex Rodriguez, and partnerships have climbed to 89 brands.

This year, Sidhu scaled the concept globally at Davos, SXSW, and the Super Bowl, creating a year-round event and proving that authentic connection drives business.

CONGRATS

Congratulations to Chris, Domenic, JP and all the winners of this year's ADWEEK Innovator 50 Awards! You are true pioneers in this industry, and we couldn't be prouder to work alongside you.

Chris Brandt
President &
Chief Brand Officer
Chipotle

Domenic DiMeglio
EVP, Chief Marketing Officer
& Chief Data Officer
Paramount Streaming

JP Colaco
Senior Vice President
& Chief T-Ads Officer
T-Mobile

IPG MEDIABRANDS

STEVE STOUTE

CEO, UnitedMasters

INDEPENDENCE IN MUSIC has never looked this powerful. Under CEO Steve Stoute, UnitedMasters has become a force for artist ownership and creative control, turning technology into leverage for musicians everywhere. With the launch of Debut+, artists can now distribute unlimited music across more than 50 platforms while keeping 100% of their master royalties.

Stoute's team also introduced Blueprint AI, a virtual A&R and marketing coach, and Real-Time Royalties, paying artists instantly when their songs are played. Those innovations helped talents like Dallas rapper BigXthaPlug and Chilean artist FloyyMenor break from the underground to chart-topping success without label backing.

By marrying access with autonomy, Stoute is shifting the balance of power in music. UnitedMasters is a blueprint for a different, more inclusive, artist-led industry where creators own their work, their data, and their future.

IAN TROMBETTA

SVP, GLOBAL SOCIAL, CREATOR, & CONTENT MARKETING, NFL

THE GAME ON the field might be the NFL's main event, but the sport has become a hybrid media company under Ian Trombetta. He's turned the NFL into a creator-fueled, always-on content machine where the social videos that players and influencers make travel far beyond the stadium. His strategy has tripled NFL social video views since 2019 and made the league the No. 1 U.S. sports brand on TikTok, growing 36% year-over-year.

From turning Super Bowl week into a festival for over 150 creators, to hiring the league's first fashion editor, to expanding the Creator of the Week program that's yielded over 300 million views to date, Trombetta is humanizing the game and expanding its cultural reach.

By making the NFL as relevant in fashion and entertainment as it is inside the stadium, Trombetta proves he doesn't need home field advantage to win.

LISA UTZSCHNEIDER

CEO, Integral Ad Science

THE DIGITAL ADVERTISING landscape is more transparent and safer thanks to Lisa Utzschneider of Integral Ad Science. The global leader in media measurement and optimization is helping brands ensure their ads show up in the right places and actually drive results.

Under her leadership, IAS has launched AI-powered products like Total Media Quality, capable of analyzing video content frame by frame across platforms such as TikTok, Meta, and YouTube. That technology now processes the equivalent of 40 years of video every day, up from just two years' worth two years ago.

Utzschneider's focus on ethical innovation is equally groundbreaking, with IAS becoming the first company to earn the Alliance for Audited Media's Ethical AI certification. With a leadership team that's nearly half women and pioneering innovations that drive results, Utzschneider is showing how AI, accountability, and inclusion can work together to make digital advertising more effective and trustworthy.

UNITED MASTERS, NFL, INTEGRAL AD SCIENCE

JEN WONG

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, Reddit

REDDIT HAS LONG been a hub for authentic conversation, which has made it an attractive but challenging proposition for brands. COO Jen Wong is ushering advertisers into the online forum in ways that feel authentic to its communities.

Initiatives like Reddit Community Intelligence turn the site's more than 22 billion posts into structured insights for marketers. Reddit Insights and Conversation Summary Add-Ons let brands make smarter, faster decisions and customize their ads with consumer testimonials, with early tests showing a 19% higher clickthrough rate.

The changes have been transformative for Reddit's business, with active advertisers jumping 50%, Q2 2025 revenue hitting $500 million (up 78% YoY), and ad revenue soaring 84% to $465 million.

Wong is also championing a more inclusive approach to business as the executive sponsor of the Trans@Reddit Employee Resource Group, ensuring that Reddit is facilitating vital conversations internally as well as on its forums.

MIKE WOODS

ECD & HEAD OF IMMERSIVE, m ss ng p eces

EXPERIENCES THAT ARE part art installation, part cultural moment—that's where Mike Woods thrives. At m ss ng p eces, he pushes brands like Microsoft, Meta AI, WhatsApp, Asics, and Chili's into entirely new territory, blending real-time tech, AI, and social-first storytelling.

Woods' Meta AI-powered Ultimate Barbershop let UFC fans try on their favorite fighters' haircuts using "magic" mirrors, then actually get them done. Microsoft's 50th anniversary got a fully immersive 1970s workspace, letting attendees step back into the company's origin story. For WhatsApp, his Not Even WhatsApp pop-ups spanned London, New York, Delhi, and São Paulo, bringing digital privacy to life in public spaces.

Woods also co-created Disc, a VR sport exclusive to Meta Quest, and led the Frozen Experience for Chili's where patrons sipped margaritas at pop-up bars made of ice. With Emmy and Cannes Lions Grand Prix wins under his belt, Woods turns tech and culture into unforgettable, shareable moments that make audiences active participants, not just spectators.

REDDIT, M SS NG P ECES

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It.

CHANGING *the* GAME 2025

Each year, She Runs It honors women in marketing, media, and tech who are transforming their brands, their organizations, their teams, and the industry overall. These game changers are catalysts of innovation who are reinventing the rules of marketing.

Learn more about—and be inspired by—their achievements here, and join She Runs It to celebrate them at a live event in New York on Nov. 6.

NO APOLOGIES

Creating whole new business models or marketplace opportunities

CRYSTAL FOOTE

FOUNDER AND HEAD OF PARTNERSHIPS, DIGITAL CULTURE GROUP

An award-winning advertising executive, Foote created the Audience Resonance Index to help brands predict which messages will move audiences and optimize their strategies for greater impact.

CARA LEWIS

CHIEF INVESTMENT OFFICER AND ACTIVATION OFFICER, DENTSU MEDIA U.S.

An industry vet, philanthropist, and 19-year cancer survivor, Lewis oversees all media channels and multiple disciplines across brand assurance, business transformation and strategy, and much more.

HEATHER MACAULAY

PRESIDENT, MADCONNECT

Macaulay has built a reputation for combining strategic thinking with hands-on execution to help companies unleash the full potential of their tech investments and speed time to value.

CAROLINA PARADAS

GENERAL MANAGER, NORTH AMERICA, SHOPBACK

This fearless fintech and digital commerce veteran is known for scaling businesses, driving successful partnerships, and executing go-to-market strategies, among her many talents.

QUANTUM LEAP

Changing the way an organization is aligned to proactively meet new challenges

GENNA FRANCONI
CEO, TRADE SCHOOL AND 22SQUARED

After holding several senior positions at 22squared, Franconi launched sister agency Trade School in 2020 and now serves as CEO of both organizations, driving innovation and growth.

MICHELLE CROSSAN-MATOS
CHIEF GROWTH OFFICER, SHARKNINJA

After holding senior marketing roles at Samsung and Ulta Beauty, Crossan-Matos moved to SharkNinja to accelerate growth in new markets and amplify the company's consumer obsession.

She Runs It.
Changing the Game Awards

Congratulations, Kym

Kym Frank
SVP, Research and Data, FOX Ad Sales

PARADIGM SHIFT HONOREE

FOX ADVERTISING

QUANTUM LEAP

SHANNON WATKINS
CHIEF BRAND MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER, FISERV

A proponent for opportunity, access, and equality in the marketing industry, Watkins has deep experience leading marketing teams at companies like Fiserv, Nike, Aflac, and The Coca-Cola Company.

SOREN GODFREY
GLOBAL CHIEF CLIENT SOLUTIONS OFFICER, IPG MEDIABRANDS

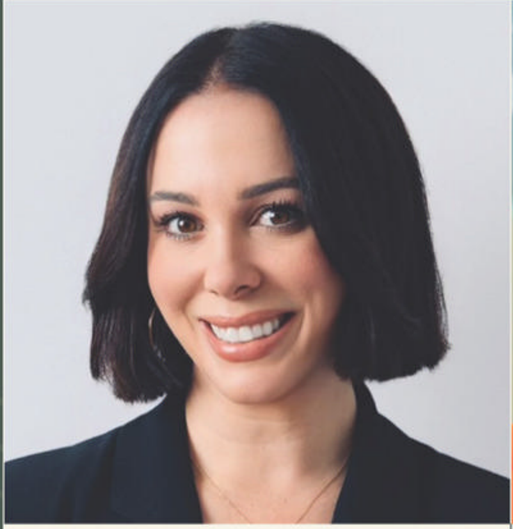
Godfrey considers herself to be an innovation architect, complexity translator, change catalyst, and problem-solver focused on driving growth and creating value for her clients.

JOHANNA BAUMAN
CMO,
PUBMATIC

During her tenure at PubMatic, Bauman has transformed how the company tells its story and elevated the brand through impactful B2B marketing strategies and programs.

JAIME MCGILL
HEAD OF STRATEGY,
DDB CHICAGO

McGill uses creativity to help brands resonate with new audiences, including recently helping Marshalls bring the element of surprise to life through innovative new creative platforms and campaigns.



LEANNE LETOURNEAU
SVP, STRATEGY AND CONSULTING, PUBLICIS GROUPE, CONNECTEDCRM

Letourneau has a track record of building high-impact teams, launching centers of excellence, and using data, personalization, and connected audience strategies to drive growth.

MELISSA FEIN
MANAGING DIRECTOR, MEDIA, ACCENTURE SONG APAC

Fein is driving transformation and showing how magic can happen when women are supported without condition, which is helping Accenture win clients and retain talent—particularly senior women leaders.

Rebecca Panico

Changing the game, with *staying* power

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BRAINWAVE

Changing the way a brand or product is marketed

AÏDA MOUDACHIROU-RÉBOIS
SVP, GLOBAL GENERAL MANAGER, MAC COSMETICS

A transformative and results-driven leader, Moudachirou-Rébois is a brand builder who oversees the cosmetics powerhouse's overall strategic vision, including marketing, product development, and innovation.

SARI FEINBERG
SVP, MARKETING AND BRAND PARTNERSHIPS, ADVERTISING AND PARTNERSHIPS, NBCUNIVERSAL

Feinberg cleverly weaves brands into NBCUniversal's extensive entertainment programming, including integrating Saturday Night Live's intellectual property and cast members into brands' marketing campaigns for the show's 50th anniversary.

JENNIFER HOURIGAN
MANAGING DIRECTOR, T-MOBILE, INITIATIVE

Over the course of her 16-year career spanning three continents, Hourigan has developed a few superpowers: creating happy, empowered, and high-performing teams and fostering deep client partnerships.

SARAH SHAKER
VP, ADVOCACY & INFLUENCE, LUXE CMO, L'ORÉAL

From getting her start in TV producing CBS' As the World Turns to shaping engagement for global beauty icons like Maybelline, IT Cosmetics, and Garnier, Shaker's career has been built on influence.

VANESSA WALLACE
CMO, SAVAGE X FENTY

Wallace is a lifelong athlete who spent 19 years at Nike before joining Rihanna's Savage X Fenty, where she spearheads brand and product marketing, media, creative, membership, and global communications.

MIRROR DIGITAL

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INSPIRING INCLUSION.
LEADING WITH PURPOSE.**

Congratulations to Sheila Marmon.

Recognized as a ***She Runs It Changing the Game*** honoree. Thank you for challenging convention and setting a new standard for what it means to shift the paradigm.

PARADIGM SHIFT Changing the way a customer segment or target audience is approached

KYM FRANK
SVP, RESEARCH AND DATA,
AD SALES,FOX CORPORATION

An authority on media and human insights, Frank is laser focused on developing cross-platform attribution models and analytics that can shape tomorrow's ad innovations.

SHEILA MARMON
FOUNDER AND CEO,
MIRROR DIGITAL

A pioneer in connecting brands to diverse audiences, Marmon and her team have executed over 1,500 digital media programs for clients like Amazon, AT&T, and Disney.

REBECCA PANICO
VP, GLOBAL MEDIA, MARKETING
AND LOYALTY, HILTON

Panico aims to lead with empathy and purpose while pushing the boundaries of what's possible to help Hilton's portfolio of brands develop insights-driven media strategies.

NIDIA SERRANO
VP, SALES MARKETING,
SIRIUSXM MEDIA

Serrano helps brands connect with audiences authentically through efforts like Fluency, the cultural marketing practice she co-founded, and La Marea Collective, a community of Latine creatives.

Congratulations

to the She Runs It

2025 Changing the Game

Honorees

> “... While some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the people who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do." -*Steve Jobs*

Thank you

for elevating our industry and defining our future.

Brainwave Winners

Changing the way a brand or product is marketed

Sari Feinberg, Senior Vice President, Marketing and Brand Partnerships, Advertising and Partnerships, NBCUniversal
Jennifer Hourigan, Managing Director, T-Mobile, Initiative
Aïda Moudachirou-Rébois, SVP Global, General Manager, M·A·C Cosmetics
Sarah Shaker, Vice President, Advocacy & Influence; LUXE CMO, L'Oreal
Vanessa Wallace, CMO, Savage X Fenty

Paradigm Shift Winners

Changing the way a customer segment or target audience is approached

Kym Frank, Senior Vice President, Research and Data, Ad Sales, Fox Corporation
Sheila Marmon, Founder & CEO, Mirror Digital
Rebecca Panico, Vice President, Global Media, Marketing & Loyalty, Hilton
Nidia Serrano, Vice President, Sales Marketing, SiriusXM Media

No Apologies Winners

Creating whole new business models or marketplace opportunities

Crystal Foote, Founder & Head of Partnerships, Digital Culture Group
Cara Lewis, Chief Investment Officer & Activation Officer, dentsu Media US
Heather Macaulay, President, MadConnect
Carolina Paradas, General Manager, North America, Shopback

Quantum Leap Winners

Changing the way an organization is aligned to pro-actively meet new challenges

Johanna Bauman, Chief Marketing Officer, PubMatic
Michelle Crossan-Matos, Chief Growth Officer, SharkNinja
Melissa Fein, Managing Director, Media, Accenture Song
Genna Franconi, Chief Executive Officer, Trade School and 22Squared
Soren Godfrey, Global Chief Client Solutions Officer, IPG Mediabrands
Leanne Letourneau, SVP, Strategy & Consulting, Publicis Groupe, ConnectedCRM
Jaime McGill, Head of Strategy, DDB Chicago
Shannon Watkins, Chief Brand Marketing and Communications Officer, Fiserv, Inc.

**Help us celebrate these leaders at the Changing The Game Awards ceremony,
November 6, 2025 | New York City**

Tickets at sherunsit.org.

**She
Runs
It.**

THE DREAM FACTORY

How Ikea's brand studio is evolving for the future.

By Brittaney Kiefer

MONTHS BEFORE THE first pumpkin spice latte of the season, in a small town deep in the forest of southern Sweden, Christmas had already arrived. Inside a production studio spanning over 86,000 square feet was a room decked out with a towering tree, stockings, wreaths, and candles. Down the hall, another was bursting with red decorations for Lunar New Year.

Between all the rooms, there were countless throw cushions, more than 3,600 books, dozens of flower arrangements, a few surfboards, and 75 sofas. These myriad domestic scenes are part of Ikea Marketing & Communications (IMC), the retailer's global marketing and content studio.

From its remote location in Älmhult—a town of some 18,000 residents and the birthplace of Ikea—IMC is a creative powerhouse that oversees more than 70,000 productions each year. It makes everything from global campaigns to 3D models and animations to films, product images, and the assembly instructions that come with Ikea's flat-pack furniture. Its employees, hailing from 34 different countries, serve 63 markets and 600 stores around the world.

“We say this is the home of homes, the dream factory,” said Mia Malmström, IMC's managing director.

Formalized in 2020, IMC is part of a growing trend of brands building their own creative studios. In-housing is on the rise, with 82% of advertisers saying they had an in-house agency in 2023, up from 78% in 2018 and 58% in 2013, according to the Association of National Advertisers.

But IMC is also evolving fast as it faces pressures like the rise of artificial intelligence, expanding from 400 to 450 employees over the past six months to meet the growing demand for content. “One of our questions is, how can we fill this new digital world with inspiration? We're still working on it,” Malmström said.

FROM CATALOGS TO CGI

The roots of IMC's mission stretch back to Ikea's early years in the 1940s, when 17-year-old entrepreneur Ingvar Kamprad began a mail-order business selling goods like pens and clocks. After expanding to furniture in 1948, Kamprad promoted his wares through brochures. Ikea published its first catalog in 1951, with Kamprad writing much of the copy.

The catalog demonstrates how communication and marketing have been at the center of the business from the start, Malmström said. “[Ikea] realized along the way that it's about not only selling a product, but putting it into context, making a home, and making it inspirational,” she said.

The last printed Ikea catalog in 2020 marked the end of an era, but IMC had already begun adapting to a new digital world, venturing into emerging production technologies like CGI starting in the 1990s. Its mission of bringing home inspiration and advice to shoppers remains, even as it takes different shapes.

Today, IMC is part creative agency, part production and technology studio. Its staff includes strategists, interior designers, developers, 3D artists, photographers, content creators, and more. Recently, the studio has been adding roles that encompass emerging tech skills, such as AI developers, copywriters with SEO competence, art directors with motion experience, software engineers, and digital product leaders.

STORYTELLING FOR HOMES

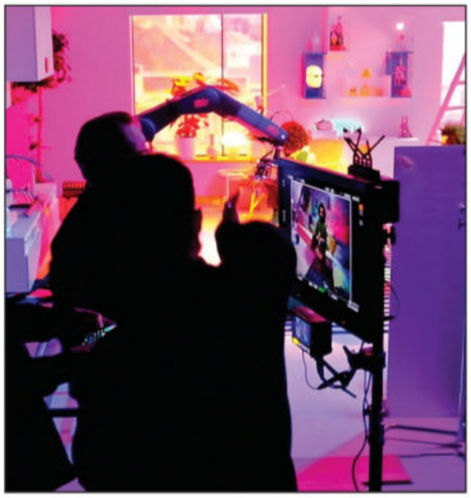
Storytelling and product development are closely entwined at Ikea, which is why IMC and the company's product teams sit near each other, Malmström explained. Both follow the same global creative direction, for which the current theme is “optimistic future.”

“It's not just about the product looking fantastic and being affordable. We want the products to be something more than a product,” Malmström said, adding that whenever Ikea develops a new product it asks, “how can we tell this story?”

A recent example is IMC's short film about the Zebrasäv pendant lamp, a quiet and human portrait of the product's designer who became obsessed with chasing light after moving to Sweden.

IMC's creative teams work differently because in addition to a typical copywriter and art director duo, they include an interior designer who helps develop innovative ways of using the products. On a tour of the studio, we observed an interior designer sitting beside a 3D motion artist to design a model room on the website.

Malmström recommends involving the marketing team as early as possible in product development and launches. “Start collaborating from the creative concept of a product and to work on the same insights and to have a joint creative direction,” she said. “Everything should be connected.”



AI AS COLLABORATOR

AI presents a new front in IMC's digital evolution. The studio “sees a lot of potential” in genAI to keep up with the volume of production needed today, said studios development manager Niklas Lindström. “The world is demanding even more content, and we need to figure out ways to satisfy that need,” he added.

IMC is already relying on Microsoft's Azure AI to automate tasks like generating metadata, captions, and alt text. Creatives also use Adobe Firefly to produce mood and storyboards and retouch images; an Azure AI writer's assistant to check that copy complies with brand guidelines; and other tools that speed up 3D production work.

Crucially, while AI is “a helping hand and collaborator” for IMC's teams, it does not replace craftsmanship and “human spark,” Malmström said.

“What we do is tactile and it's about homes, which deals with emotion. That will never go away,” she said. “We want to tell a story, to put homes into a context that matters for people.” ▨

BRITTANEY KIEFER *is the creativity editor at* **ADWEEK**.

IKEA

Hooked for Life

Mādin Agency's Jamieson Maunder turned his love of fishing into a deep sea charter. ***By Eva Kis***

WHEN MOST EXECUTIVES talk about "the thrill of the hunt," they mean new business. But Mādin Agency's Jamieson Maunder means it a little more literally.

When he's not crafting campaigns as partner and chief creative officer, Maunder chases game fish off the San Diego coast aboard his deep sea charter, AWOL Sportfishing.

Maunder's love of fishing began during his childhood in England, where he grew up "really in the boonies" in Suffolk. His parents divorced when he was young, and Maunder's mother took it upon herself to teach her sons the things boys should know, like clay pigeon shooting and fishing in the local river.

Their town was so remote that hunting and fishing were not just hobbies for the Maunders and their neighbors: "I love the freedom of being out in nature and having that skillset, going out to fish to feed myself and my family," he said.

Eventually, his creative streak took Maunder to London, where he led experiential campaigns for the likes of McDonald's and Coca-Cola through Olympic partnerships with CSM Group. But the constant travel—including going to Brazil every other week—wore thin once he started a family.

Just after the Pyeongchang Winter Games in 2018, former Mother CEO Peter Ravailhe lured him to San Diego for a creative role with performance apparel startup Snapbac. Maunder instantly fell in love with the sunshine and happy people. "We couldn't get out of vacation mode," he recalled. "As soon as I saw the ocean, how beautiful it was, I was like, 'I'd love to be out here, I'd love to own a boat, I'd love to fish more.'"

He started going out on the ocean every Sunday with a captain, Andrew Lasky, coming back with tuna, yellowtail, and dorado. When Covid hit, Maunder co-founded Mādin Agency with Nick Valenti, and also expanded his fishing ambitions. Boats were cheap as people offloaded assets during the early part of the pandemic, so Maunder and Lansky pooled their savings and bought a classic Boston Whaler, fixed it up themselves, and started AWOL Sportfishing.

The name—short for absent without official leave—came from Maunder's frequent "disappearances" to catch the next big thing. His largest prize so far: a 280-pound bluefin tuna. "It unfortunately ruins everything else about fishing for you as soon as you go out on a boat and catch a big fish," he warned. With nothing else as large in the waters of the coastal Pacific, Maunder is looking to Miami or Costa Rica to pursue quarry such as marlin.

Running a charter pays the boat bills, but that's not the only reason Maunder decided to go commercial. As a deckhand in AWOL's early days, he did everything from buying the snacks to baiting the hooks, with the goal of "giving people the opportunity to really experience how I want fishing to be for everyone."

Maunder still joins trips when he can, usually once a month, and admits feeling the same thrill every time. And while the AWOL crew can tailor the fishing experience for any skill level, "sportfishing" is in the company's name for a reason: Fighting a 200-pound fish for an hour is not for the faint of heart.

"There's moments where my biceps are burning, I'm out of breath; I'm holding onto a boat going 40 miles an hour, I'm on my feet the whole day," Maunder said. "It really is a sport." ◼

EVA KIS *is the production editor at* **ADWEEK.**

Jamieson Maunder's biggest catch so far is a 280-pound bluefin tuna.

JAMIESON MAUNDER

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Angela Bassett
FARE Celebrity Ambassador

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